

Phoenix Intuition

semprini

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by *semprini*

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1. Chapter 1

Prologue

May 7, 1998

12:16 p.m. GMT

Snape spoke again. "Well, I believe that is all I have to say." He bent to one knee again, his face less than a foot from Voldemort's. "Goodbye, Voldemort." He stood, and gestured to Harry that he was finished. Recovering from his momentary surprise at finally hearing Snape say the name, Harry applied the Imperius Charm, and Voldemort collapsed, unconscious. Harry sat, and began imprinting love on Voldemort's mind.

Voldemort was unconscious, but something inside him screamed. Or, it would have, if it could scream.

The alien force had invaded before, but the entity which both shared and controlled the consciousness of the man born Tom Riddle had only needed to retreat for a short time, after which it could return. But not this time. The repellent force was taking hold in the mind the entity had inhabited. The entity would have to leave, for good.

The entity did not 'think' as such, so it was not frustrated at losing access to the most power it had ever had. It would simply have to find another. Many would welcome it, as had Riddle long ago, but it would only join the one best suited to it. As it had with Voldemort, it would seek to create the conditions under which it would continue to flourish. As would any being.

For this entity, those conditions were hatred, pain, fear, anger. In a word, evil. Some would call the entity a demon, but it did not have its own consciousness; it was more a force of nature, created and sustained by the dark side of the mass consciousness of the human race. The more fear and anger it could create among humans, the more powerful it would be. As it left Voldemort behind, it started reaching out to human minds, unthinkingly seeking darkness and power—that is, the one most like itself. It would know it when it found it.

Since it did not think, it did not know that its past host's actions had an enormous influence on its future host. If it could know such a thing, it would certainly have approved. As long as it created anger and fear—which, in turn, created it—it would always have a home.

It did not 'look' for its next host, as it did not have eyes; it was not physical in any way and did not have any senses as humans understood them. What it had was an attraction to what it sought; it was pulled, as if by gravity. Its destination was an ocean away, but it was there within seconds.

Leonard Drake was dreaming. He entered a tavern and looked around, feeling as though he was supposed to meet someone, but he didn't know who. Suddenly the place felt darker—not the lighting, but the atmosphere. He found himself walking toward the booth farthest from the door, and sat opposite a man whose face he couldn't see, though the man wore no hat or hood. He felt eyes on him, appraising him.

Normally not at all a nervous man, Drake now was. "What do you want?" he asked, as he had somehow sensed that the man wanted something from him.

The man's voice was familiar, but Drake couldn't quite place it. "What do *you* want," it responded, its tone suggesting a far more serious intent than Drake's question had. A lot depended on his answer, Drake somehow knew.

He answered as if under the influence of Veritaserum. "I want someone to pay for what happened to Dad and Rob."

The man's tone suggested raised eyebrows on his unseen face. "Is that all? Your ambition stops there?"

"No, it *starts* there," shot back Drake. "A lot of people across the pond, as the Brits so quaintly put it, have blood on their hands. Mainly Lucius Malfoy and Rudolphus Bright, but a lot of others. And a lot over here, for sitting back and letting it happen. That ambitious enough for you?"

"What about Voldemort?" the man asked calmly. "Isn't he the most responsible of all?"

"He's in that Ring, last I heard. Potter was going to go in after him. Only one's going to come out alive."

"Potter was successful," the man informed him. "The Dark Lord is... no more."

Drake grunted. "Fine with me. But Potter's complicit in their deaths, just less so. He's pretty far up there on the list. He's so noble, when it's convenient for him to be, which it wasn't when it came to Dad and Rob. But it's everybody. They died for no reason, and nobody cared. Nobody cares unless it hurts them. Otherwise, it's, 'gee, that's too bad. Now, what are we doing for lunch?' I want them to hurt like I was hurt. That's what I want." He squinted, but still couldn't make out the stranger's features. "Now, why do you care?"

The light suddenly changed, and Drake could see the stranger's face: it was his own, his own eyes looking back at him. But the eyes were cold; he was sure his eyes had never looked like that. "I can help you," said his likeness. "Together, we can accomplish things you would never have imagined. I have just one more question."

"What's that?"

The man paused, looking over Drake carefully. "How badly do you want it?"

Five minutes later, Drake awoke, feeling like a new man. Which, in fact, he was.

September 11, 2001

1:22 p.m. GMT

Pausing for a moment on the well-traveled Tibetan mountain path, Luna Lovegood took a moment to appreciate the scenery. The sun was behind the mountain, but she could see enough pink and orange set against the partly cloudy sky to know that sunset was well underway. Looking behind her, she saw the sky slowly changing from blue to black; there were a few lights in the valley beyond the mountains, but not many. She appreciated the beauty of nature and the relative lack of the trappings of 'civilization,' and a part of her wished she had been raised in this sort of environment, rather than England. Then again, she thought, maybe I wouldn't appreciate it like I do if I'd grown up here.

A few minutes later, she continued her trek up the mountain. She wasn't headed for the peak, but a small cave about three-quarters of the way up. She could have Apparated to the cave, but she had been advised by the mystics that it was simply not done, and that walking was

better anyway for the exercise and the connection with nature. She supposed that anyone who was that impatient to talk to the First probably wasn't ready to do so anyway, and the junior mystics would know that.

She chuckled inwardly at the word 'junior'; it was how they referred to themselves, even though many appeared to be in their fifties or sixties, a few even older. The First, she had been told, was much older than any of them. Unless he lives in the cave, he must be in pretty good condition, she thought, to make this walk all the time. Maybe he did live there, as she hadn't seen him anywhere around the other mystics' living quarters and common areas. In the four months she had been there talking to and learning from the 'junior' mystics she had heard the First referred to occasionally; not with reverence, as she had thought might be the case, but more matter-of-factly. Meetings with him were rare, occurring only when there was some particular reason; one did not request a meeting, but was summoned to one by a phoenix which visited the compound from time to time. Luna had asked who companioned the phoenix and was told that no one did. She thought to ask why an uncompanioned phoenix spent time with them, but decided not to; she had decided to try to keep questions to a minimum, with the idea that they would tell her anything they thought was important for her to know. She was curious about many things, but tried to focus on what she was there to learn.

Fifteen minutes later, she reached the cave. Its entrance wasn't immediately obvious; the mouth was narrow, and anyone much taller than her would have had to bend to get in. As she entered, she saw light ahead. Moving closer, she saw four hovering globes of energy, two on either side of the cave, providing light. Further ahead, there was a robed figure sitting near the back of the cave, on the dirty ground.

The cave was not much larger than the living room of the house she'd grown up in.

The man didn't move or give any indication acknowledging her presence, though he must have heard her approach. She had decided to treat him with respect, but much like anyone else. "Hi, I'm Luna," she said simply.

The man reached up and pulled back the hood, revealing his face. To Luna's great surprise, he appeared to be a fairly young man, certainly no older than forty, and perhaps as young as his early thirties. Otherwise, he was roughly as she had expected: Asian, with shoulder-length hair and a beard. "Hello, Luna," he said. He didn't suggest that she sit, which she took as an indication that he felt she should do whatever made her the most comfortable. She sat on the ground, about ten feet from him. "Nice place you have here," she said without irony.

She saw the surprise in his eyes first, then he smiled, and chuckled lightly. "I believe you are the first person to say that. Yes, it is only a small mountain cave, but it does have a certain appeal."

To Harry especially, thought Luna. He'd appreciate the seclusion. "Not that it couldn't use a woman's touch," she added offhandedly.

He nodded. "Plants would not do well, unfortunately." He said nothing more for a moment. She had a dozen questions she wanted to ask, but he had summoned her, so she would wait to hear what he had to say. Eventually, he spoke again. "I understand the others are most impressed with you. They say you have the aspect of a true seeker."

She smiled briefly, thinking about how amused Ronald would be to hear that. "They have been very kind and

helpful. I've wanted to come here for some time now, ever since Harry gave—I should say, Harry is—"

The man gently cut her off, nodding. "I know of him."

Luna resumed her sentence. "He gave us a talk about Professor Dumbledore's history, and he talked about this place. He said being here was one of the formative experiences of Professor Dumbledore's life."

Again, the First nodded. "I remember Albus well... such an earnest young man. And so troubled, for a time. I was pleased that we could assist him while he found his path. We could not do it for him, of course. He wanted answers, but the only answer we could give him was that he had to find his own answers. Each of us must find our own path." Luna listened serenely, expressionless.

The First raised an eyebrow slightly. "You remind me of him, in some ways. You do not wonder how one as youthful in appearance as I could have taught him, so long ago."

Luna shrugged lightly. "Just because something can't be explained easily, or isn't known as a fact, doesn't mean it's impossible. I've known that all my life."

"You are one of the few who does, and that is one of your great strengths," agreed the First. "What prevents most from seeing the true realm is an unconscious unwillingness to do so." Luna recalled that the mystics used the phrase 'true realm' as Harry had used the words 'spiritual realm,' to describe the place where people went when they died, that all spirits called home.

He paused for a minute, then spoke again. "When I summoned you, I did not know why I chose this precise time to do so. However, I was in communion with the true realm

before you arrived, and now I know why I chose this time. An event of great importance is about to occur. I do not know its exact nature, but I know that Harry will be involved. He will be tested as he never has before."

Luna winced; Harry had already been tested so much, that was saying a lot. "Is there anything I can do to help him?"

The First shook his head. "No one can help him. You are here in part because this is an opportunity to attempt seeing at a distance. You love him, do you not?"

She smiled wryly. "Most of Hogwarts does, by now," she half-joked. "But yes, I do."

"You can use that energy to find him, to see him," the First explained. "You must first focus on the true realm, then focus on him. Your love will be your path to him."

"I understand," she agreed. "How will you see him? I assume you've never met him."

"True, but I love him," the First said simply. "I love all."

Luna was curious. "Even one who would kill you?"

"Especially one who would kill me, for no one needs love more."

She found that she understood. She started clearing her mind in preparation for what she was going to do. She felt a pang of worry, and hoped he would be all right. As if reading her mind, he advised her, "Do not focus on what is happening, or on the results of the events. Just focus on love, on him. Simply know that you can see him."

She briefly wondered whether this was an auspicious time to make the attempt because of the importance of the events, whether that made Harry easier to see from a distance than would usually be the case. She allowed herself a last wish for his well-being before clearing her mind. They both closed their eyes, and reached out with their minds.

Harry was sitting in a comfortable recliner in his living room, reading a book. Normally on a weekday afternoon he would be at Hogwarts, but he had no classes after noon on Tuesdays; he had quickly discovered that one of the benefits of being the one to make the schedule was that he could make his exactly as he liked. He was still available, however; he had set a charm on his office door so that he would hear it in his head if anyone knocked, and he could appear in his office instantly if he so chose.

The charm was one of the many previously unknown spells that Harry had come up with over the past few years. In the course of defeating Voldemort, he had discovered that he had the unique ability to do anything that was possible to do by magic. Experience had taught him not to use that ability with a heavy hand, especially when it could affect others, but he had no compunctions about using it to make his life, and sometimes that of his friends, more convenient in small ways.

He was reading a Muggle nonfiction book about relationships; it was the fifth on John's list. His friend and Hogwarts Muggle Studies teacher had been urging him to become better versed in Muggle culture, and had given him a reading list and urged him to read one Muggle newspaper a day. Harry had initially resisted, as he could think of far more enjoyable ways to spend his limited free time, but eventually acquiesced partly because he knew Dumbledore had made understanding Muggle culture a priority. He found

the books interesting; he was looking forward to talking to Ginny about some of the information in the current one.

To his mild surprise, the fireplace lit up. There was a small Apparation area near the living room which was usually used by those who Apparated to his home (he had used his unusual magical abilities to make his home accessible by Apparation only to those who he had already authorized, much as was the case with fireplaces), and he was accustomed to seeing unexpected visitors appearing there. The only ones who would use the fireplace were those who couldn't Apparate for whatever reason...

As the thought entered his head that it must be one of his few Muggle friends who had access to his fireplace, Dudley stepped out. Harry was about to greet him casually, but saw from Dudley's face that he hadn't just come to chat.

"Turn on the TV," said Dudley abruptly, more anxious than Harry had ever seen him. "CNN."

Harry didn't watch television often, but had long since been able to operate the television mentally, with magic. The television sprang on, and Harry was startled by the first image he saw: an airplane had obviously crashed into one of two very tall buildings, which Harry quickly recognized as New York's World Trade Center towers. There was a voice-over which Harry didn't listen to. He turned to Dudley and gave him a questioning look.

"I think it happened about ten minutes ago," Dudley told him.

"Was it an accident?" asked Harry, mortified at the thought that it might not have been.

"They don't know yet, but most of us at the office don't think it was an accident," said Dudley darkly. "I mean, come on, what are the chances?" Dudley's new job—he had just started a few weeks ago—was with the Muggle Liaison office, which liked to have some Muggle-borns on its staff, though Dudley was the first actual, non-magical Muggle to work there. Harry imagined there would be a television set to a news channel at all times.

"Makes sense," agreed Harry, still shocked. "I assume all the people in the plane are dead."

"Have to be," said Dudley. "And a fair number in the building, too. But what they're worried most about is that the building could come down. Those planes are heavy, there's bound to be a fire, with all that jet fuel... once that plane starts falling, it's not going to stop."

Stunned, Harry watched the images on the screen. "I don't believe it... who would do this?"

Dudley sighed, as if unable to believe Harry was this ignorant. "Arabs, of course. There've been a few terrorists who weren't Arabs, but most have been. It has to be them."

Harry thought to ask why, and decided not to. He knew that Dudley, though knowing more than Harry, was hardly an expert on international affairs; he would ask John later.

They watched and listened in silence for a few minutes. Suddenly, a live shot of the towers revealed another plane approaching from the right. Knowing what was about to happen, Harry leaped to his feet. To Harry's surprise, Dudley quickly shoved him back into the chair. "You can't do that!" Dudley shouted. "You know better—"

The plane crashed into the building; Harry gasped, then bowed his head, emotion rising. "That's another couple hundred people, not to mention the ones in the building—"

"And you could have saved them," finished Dudley. "Most wizards can't move objects anywhere near that big, but you could have shoved it to one side or the other, made it miss the building. And blown wizarding secrecy to smithereens."

Harry looked up at Dudley angrily, but looked away after a second, because he knew Dudley was right. "They just said there could be as many as twenty thousand people in those buildings," he muttered. "How many lives is wizarding secrecy worth?"

"A lot," responded Dudley to Harry's rhetorical question. "You know what would happen. Panic, wizards rounded up, maybe wars... I got this big lecture on it when I joined the office. After all, that's the whole point of the office in the first place, to make sure Muggles who don't already know don't find out."

Harry was only half-listening to Dudley as he watched the screen. "You think those buildings are going to come down?"

Dudley nodded. "I'd be amazed if at least one didn't, and at this point if one goes down, it could easily take the other with it. I hope people are getting out of there fast, they don't have much time."

Maybe I couldn't stop the plane without it being noticed, thought Harry, but I can do something about the people in those buildings. Making a decision, he stood. "Harry, don't —" started Dudley, but Harry vanished.

Dudley sighed and turned his attention to the television. He watched for another minute, and decided to get back to the

Ministry. He had taken a step toward the fireplace when he heard a popping noise. Turning, he saw Kingsley step into the room.

"Where is he?" asked Kingsley, glancing at the screen.

"There," responded Dudley, gesturing at the television. "He just left."

"Damn," exhaled Kingsley, though he clearly was prepared for the possibility. "I hope he knows what he's doing."

"He'll save lives," said Dudley. "Beyond that, it's hard to say what'll happen." He paused. "I'd better get back."

Dudley stopped again on his way to the fireplace to respond to Kingsley, who asked, "Dudley... will you keep this under your hat for the time being?"

Dudley nodded; he would have anyway. "Sure." He returned to the Ministry, intending to follow the news even more closely.

Harry appeared on the roof of a ten-story building five blocks from the World Trade Center towers. People were running away from the towers; he could hear many sirens, some very close. Fire trucks stopped in front of the buildings, and firemen rushed inside. Looking at the towers themselves, he could see many people getting out. He fervently hoped the buildings would last long enough to allow everyone to escape, but he realized that each plane had hit about ten floors below the top of the buildings, and the people on the upper floors were probably trapped.

He looked up, and used his magic to look at the top floors through the walls, zooming in. Some were running through the halls and offices, looking for stairs that weren't blocked

by the wreckage below. Some were on their cell phones, having a last conversation with their loved ones. A few were praying. Having a basic plan in mind when he left his home, Harry suddenly realized that he couldn't save anyone who was on a phone; someone outside the building knew they were there, and their disappearance couldn't be explained.

He focused on a blonde middle-aged woman on a floor two floors above the plane's impact in the second building. Suddenly she was standing a few feet in front of him. She gasped and looked around, still panicked. Harry cast a spell, and she immediately calmed down. "It'll be all right," he assured her. He then cast a Memory Charm, including in it the false memory that she had been late to work that morning and hadn't reached it yet when the planes struck; he mentally instructed her to unconsciously construct details supporting the story that seemed most plausible to her. Finally, he teleported her to a nearby street, placing a charm on her that would make her invisible to those who happened to be looking in her direction at the time; she would become visible to them only after they looked away and looked back. It was less than ideal, but Harry knew he only had so much time, and couldn't find isolated spots to send everyone.

He next found a young man near the top of the first tower, and repeated the procedure; after the first five, he started doing two at a time, as fast as he could, always choosing from the floors above where the planes hit. He hoped against hope that the buildings would hold long enough for everyone below the planes to get out.

He had gotten out perhaps a hundred when, looking for the next two, he saw the top of one of the buildings start to crumble. No! he screamed mentally. If I just had that device,

the one that Hermione has that we got from Voldemort, the one that stops time—

It happened very suddenly. He knew that he could do anything that was possible to do by magic; since the device made time stop outside a certain radius magically, he could therefore do it. In that instant, the building stopped collapsing, all sound ceased. Time had stopped, except for the area around him.

Harry's heart sank again, as he realized it wasn't that simple. He could save everyone still alive in the buildings, but that too would shatter wizarding secrecy. Many had escaped while he had been working, but there still had to be thousands of people in the buildings, and it would hardly go unnoticed that so few died when the towers came down. I could save some, he thought. Yes, you could, he replied, but when to stop? Another hundred? Five hundred? Two thousand? No matter how many you save, you'll want to save them all, and every one you save increases the chance that what you do will be noticed.

What if I could save five hundred more, and not have it be noticed? If I don't, that's five hundred who'll die who I could have saved.

Yes, but you don't know where that limit is, he reminded himself. You could have exceeded it already, for all you know. This is what's supposed to happen. You can't do everything. Let it go.

I can't let those people die when I could prevent it, he thought desperately.

They're already dead, he told himself. Hermione was right, this is your saving-people-thing. You start, and you won't be able to stop. It's like an alcoholic saying he'll just have one

more drink. Stop now. There'll be a worldwide focus on this afterwards, and if you do something that gets magic noticed, there's no turning back. You can't risk it.

He gasped for breath, starting to accept the inevitable. If I start time again, it's like I'm holding thousands of people, then just dropped them...

He knew it was an emotional reaction, but he couldn't help it. After a few more seconds of agonizing, he did what he knew he had to do. He let time run again.

He sat heavily on the roof, his head in his hands. He heard the awful sound of the tower collapsing, then glanced up, and saw through the smoke that the other one was starting to go. Unable to stand it any more, with a thought, he was suddenly back in his living room, sitting in the same position on the carpet. He started to sob, crying for the families of the people he'd wanted to save, already second-guessing his decision.

There was a flash of light, and Hermione let go of Flora and sat on the carpet next to Harry, pulling him into a hug. He held her and cried on her shoulder. She sent him love and reassurance through the mental link that Fawkes and Flora had given them before their final encounter with Voldemort. Her feelings told him that he had done the right thing. It was too risky to do any more than he already had.

A part of him knew that she was right, but he continued to sob anyway. She held and comforted him, knowing that he could do nothing else.

Thousands of miles away, the First opened his eyes, and a tear rolled down his cheek. "I weep for him," he said to Luna quietly, "because I know exactly what he is feeling. I have been in the same situation, too many times."

"I didn't see all of it, but I saw enough to understand what happened," she said. "But when you say that you've been in the same situation, do you mean..."

He nodded. "I am the First. He is the Second." He let Luna digest that for a minute, then continued. "It is partly because of temptations such as that that I live in near-isolation. For those who wield such power as he does, as I do, it is too easy to use. I feel it is best not to."

Luna was thoughtful. "You said he would be tested. Does that mean he failed the test? He shouldn't have done what he did?"

The First shook his head. "There is no right or wrong to this. By 'tested' I meant that he would have to make a choice, a very difficult choice."

His manner suggested to Luna that he was telling her things that he didn't often reveal. "As you have guessed, I have the same magical abilities that he does; I can do anything that can be done by magic. I prefer to 'see' distant events through the eye of the true realm, as we just did; however, I can do as he did, see any spot on the Earth I choose by using magic. I quickly learned not to do so. I have seen men tortured and killed, women raped and maimed, too many atrocities to count.

"In the beginning, soon after I found this power, I saved many. But it did not take me long to see where it would lead. Should I save all within my field of vision, when my field of vision encompasses the entire world? And if not, how should I choose whom to save and whom to allow to die?

"In addition, as I communed with the true realm I began to realize that it was not my place. Horrible as the events of any life may be, as desperately disadvantaged as anyone

may find himself, it all happens for a reason; hardship is how we learn. I cannot interfere with that, much as I might wish to."

"But we help people all the time," protested Luna. "If I saw someone on the street being attacked and I could help them, I would."

"Indeed," agreed the First. "It is different only for me, for the world is my street, and there is no limit to my ability to help. You can see only so far, help only so much, and you may take a risk in doing so. I should not do as a normal human does, because I have power far beyond that of the most powerful wizard."

She thought it over. "But so does Harry. You don't think he shouldn't have done what he did today?"

He shook his head. "He found this ability only three years ago, when he defeated the wizard known as Voldemort; this is still new to him. He tries not to use it, except for small things such as conveniences for himself and his friends. He understands that he should not attempt to change the world. He tries not to look too far over the horizon, and resists the urge to look for people to save. The crisis today was simply of such a magnitude that he found he could not ignore it. We learn by our experiences, and he will learn from this. We all must make our own choices."

"You know a lot about him," observed Luna.

"I have been keeping an eye on him, as you say, through the true realm. No doubt I will meet him one day. If he desires my counsel, the true realm will direct him to me. He may be pleased to know that there is another like him." The First gave a wry, slightly sad smile. "When he first discovered

this, he hoped to teach his friends. After today's events, he may decide he would not wish it on them."

Luna understood that she shouldn't tell Harry, or anyone, about the First. She thought to ask why she in particular had been summoned, but she had a feeling she wouldn't get an answer she understood.

George Sheldon sat at the wheel of his car, crying. His wife had just died.

There was no proof; he knew there never would be. She had called him twenty-five minutes ago, however, from her office near the top of the first World Trade Center tower. They'd had a brief, desperate conversation which both knew would be their last, but tried not to admit it. She said before getting off the phone that she was going to join some people who were looking for a clear way down. Five minutes later, the building she was in had collapsed. He knew that she couldn't have gotten out in fifteen minutes, much less five. She was dead.

He'd run out to the parking lot, not wanting to break down in front of his co-workers. He'd been crying for the past ten minutes. How was he going to tell the kids? Both were in school; he hoped the classrooms weren't showing live coverage of what had happened. What a horrible way to find out your mother died... but then, is there really a good way...

His cell phone rang. His first impulse was to ignore it, but then he realized that it could be the kids' school. Summoning all his will to stop crying, he took a deep breath and answered the phone. "Yes?"

"George! I'm glad I got you. Did you hear about what happened?"

It couldn't be... it was impossible... "V- Vicky?"

"Yes, it's me, I'm sorry I didn't call sooner, I've been in kind of a daze... I just wanted to make sure you knew I was all right. You must've been so worried..."

George was stunned. "Vicky, I don't believe it! How did you get out of there?"

"I was never there, thank God. Usually I would have been, but today on the subway I got really bad cramps, you know how I sometimes get, and so I called the office, told them I'd be an hour late, and sat at a Starbucks to wait for it to ease up. But I'm just devastated, all the people in the office, they must be dead..." A pause. "George, are you there?"

George found he could barely speak. "Yeah, I'm here... I'm just... so happy you're alive, I was sure you were dead." He decided he'd wait until he was with Vicky in person to tell her his version of the morning's events. A part of him wondered if he was hallucinating this whole call, that his mind was refusing to accept her death. "Honey, how soon can you get home?"

"I'm not sure, I don't know what's happening with the trains. But I'll get home one way or another."

"I'll head in, see if I can pick you up; the traffic to the City might be tied up too. We'll keep in contact on the cell, but if you can get a train, do it."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll call the school, have them tell the kids I'm okay. I can't wait to see you, I just want to be with you."

"Me too, honey. I love you." They hung up.

He suddenly burst into tears again. What in the world had happened? Could he have imagined one of the two phone calls? Right at that moment, he didn't care. Vicky was alive, that was enough. On a sudden impulse, he dialed her cell again; they exchanged only a few sentences this time, but he needed to be reassured again that it was actually her. He started the car and headed for New York City.

To Harry's lack of surprise, his actions—reported in the September 12th Daily Prophet—ignited a firestorm of controversy in the wizarding world. His standing, still high three years after Voldemort's defeat, was such that no high-level Ministry officials attacked his actions directly, but pointed questions were raised, and it was the main topic in the Prophet for the next few days. Harry sat for questions from Minister of Magic Bright and the undersecretaries, who afterwards pronounced themselves satisfied that Harry's actions posed no danger to wizarding secrecy, but admonished him to avoid such actions in the future. Harry heard that many wizarding families had debates on the issue, which he supposed was a good thing.

Harry had no plans for Sunday the 16th; he looked forward to spending a day relaxing, unwinding from the stressful week. James, whose first birthday party had just been two weeks ago, was at the Burrow with his mother and grandmother. Harry planned on joining them later, but was happy with solitude for the moment.

He was thinking about popping over to the Burrow for lunch when Fawkes appeared, mentally sending Harry unusual information. Another phoenix companion apparently wanted to talk to Harry, and had asked her phoenix to give Fawkes the message. Harry got an image of a woman in her late fifties, plain-looking, hair mostly gray. Interesting, thought Harry. I've been bonded for how long—almost exactly five

years now, and it's the first time this has ever happened. Noting through their link Harry's willingness to meet the woman, Fawkes flew into the air, hovering above Harry. There's another thing I haven't done for a long time, he thought, use Fawkes for transportation. Haven't needed to.

He reached for Fawkes's tail, and soon found himself outside. The weather was sunny and warm; a glance told him he was in a park. It had to be a park for wizards, though, much like the one in Hogsmeade, as a phoenix was perched on the back of a chair at a nearby table.

The phoenix's companion rose to greet him, smiling warmly. "Professor Potter, I'm Aubrey Schmidt. Thank you for accepting my invitation, and for responding so quickly. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The translation charm rendered her words in accentless English; he had an idea from her last name where he was, but he decided to confirm it. Shaking her hand, he replied, "Pleased to meet you. This is... Germany, right?"

She nodded, impressed. "A suburb of Munich. How did you work that out so quickly?"

"I used my... I think of it as a 'remote eye,' it's the phrase Headmistress McGonagall used when I first told her about it. I visualize the spot where I want it to be, and I can see the view from that spot. Just now, I put it five miles in the air above where we are now."

"Fascinating," enthused Schmidt. "I could be here for an hour asking about all your abilities—I know you went into considerable detail in the International WIZARDING Journal, but you've probably found more since then—but I'll spare you, since that's not why I invited you. It's actually not I who would like to talk to you, but this gentleman," she said as

she gestured to an old man getting up from his chair. Short, slightly stooped, bald with white hair along the sides of his head, he looked every bit of what Harry assumed were his eighty-odd years.

The man's voice, if nothing else, was strong and healthy. "Professor," he greeted Harry, with as firm a handshake as his age allowed. "I'm Erich Reinhardt, and I too thank you for coming. Aubrey is an old friend of the family, and I decided to impose on her, as she's one of the only two phoenix companions in Germany."

She smiled at Harry. "I remember a time when England only had two, one of which was Albus. Now you have... eight, is it? And the most recent six all use the magic of love that you discovered. Phoenixes do indeed seem quite taken with it." Harry still used the phrase 'energy of love' to describe his discovery, as that was what he had always called it, but he understood why some chose to use the more poetic phrase 'magic of love'; he had to admit it sounded better, and had a very pretty double meaning.

"Yes, they do," he agreed, happy that his influence had pleased the phoenix community. "We thought that might be the case when Flora chose Hermione, but I've been surprised at what's happened since then. Winston, Cassandra, Beth, Professor Sprout, then Pansy just last month." He smiled at the recollection.

"Yes, I read about that," said Aubrey. "She got Red, didn't she?"

Harry nodded. Red, he had discovered soon after Pansy had been chosen, was an unusual phoenix in that he had only ever chosen Healers as companions. "We were joking with her when it happened, saying that Red chooses Healers

because he cries a lot and wants to put the tears to good use; right after she was chosen, Pansy was crying a lot of the day because she was so happy. We were saying, see, Red's influencing you already."

Aubrey and Erich laughed. "I can imagine," she agreed. "Please, let's all sit. Erich has a story he'd like to tell you."

Harry regarded the old man with interest; Erich cleared his throat. "First of all, this is something I've never told anyone before; you'll understand the reason by the time I'm done. Even Aubrey is hearing it for the first time. You'll also understand the reason I'm telling it to you. I thought of sending you an owl, but it occurred to me that you must get them all the time from people you don't know, making requests, offers, and so forth. I suppose you've gotten more than normal over the past few days," he added wryly.

"A bit," allowed Harry, in a tone that made the understatement clear.

"Not surprising. Well, to the story... I was born in 1919, to Muggle parents. Had a rather hard childhood; you may or may not be aware that the '20s were a hard time for Germany. Turned out I was a wizard. I went to Durmstrang; though it wasn't very Muggle-friendly, I got by. I was glad to be a wizard, for more reasons than one: I turned eighteen in 1937. I hope you know enough history to understand the significance."

John had given Harry (and the other teachers in the staff room, but Harry knew it was mainly intended for him) a few informational lectures about World War II, explaining that it was a crucial turning point in Muggle history. "You would have been drafted by the Nazis."

Erich nodded. "Fortunately, as you probably know, records for all Muggle-born wizards are erased from public records by that country's Ministry, so as far as the Reich knew, I never existed. Now, my father, he was a scientist, a physicist. He was placed on the team that was trying to develop the atomic bomb for Germany. He wasn't a key member—not important enough for the Americans to spirit away after the war—but a member, and he knew what was going on. Of course, he wasn't supposed to talk about it at home, but he did. Not in detail—neither my mother nor I would have understood the highly scientific aspects of it—but enough that we knew what was happening.

"My father wasn't a rabid Nazi; he considered himself loyal to the country and people of Germany, but he didn't believe in the master-race ideology. He did what he did for his country. In the meantime, wizards were becoming aware of the extermination of Jews; using magic, it was easy enough to find out. My father didn't want to believe that it was happening; he was very disturbed by what I was telling him, but he knew he couldn't escape his work even if he wanted to. The policy of the German Magic Ministry was one of strict non-interference, but a few of us defied the regulations now and then, and saved some Jews who otherwise would have died, got them out of the country." Harry felt he was beginning to understand why Erich was telling him this story.

"As you know, by 1944 things were starting to go against Germany, but at the same time, real progress was being made in the atomic research. I won't bore you with the technical details, but in May they thought they had it, and a test was arranged. Not an actual bomb test, but the kind that would confirm that they had the ability to build a bomb that would work. It would still need to be tested, of course, but this was a major step.

"I knew more from my father by this time; I knew what the test involved, how it was to be done. I was also repelled by Hitler and the Nazis, what they were doing. Most wizards were able to ignore it, focusing on the wizarding world only. As a Muggle-born, I couldn't do that so easily. In any case... the night before the test, I Apparated into the laboratory and sabotaged the experiment." Harry's eyes went wide, as did Aubrey's. "They had been sure it would work, they couldn't understand why it hadn't. It set them back months, and by the time they got close again, it was too late. The war was over."

Erich gazed at Harry solemnly. "I interfered with Muggle events in almost the grandest way possible; I would have been locked up for years if anyone had found out. Every wizarding ethic says I shouldn't have done what I did." He paused. "But think about what the world might be like if I hadn't."

Harry found he didn't have the imagination to do so, but an awed Aubrey did. "Hitler would have ruled Europe... at best, England would have retained nominal autonomy only, and been made to pay Versailles-type reparations. Stalin probably wouldn't have surrendered, and Germany would have bombed Russia flat, once they got enough bombs... the ramifications are enormous." She stared at Erich. "All this time, you never told anyone..."

Erich shook his head. "Not even my father knew; I didn't know how he would react. But I've often thought I should tell someone before I die." Still looking at Harry, Erich continued, "When this happened, it seemed clear that you were the one I should tell. It's not the same situation, of course; it would be more analogous if you had somehow found out about the terrorists that morning and stopped them. But my point is that interfering with Muggle affairs

doesn't have to be a bad thing. I happened to be in a position where what I did might have had a massive impact. Yours had a smaller impact, but still a very positive one. The next time anyone tells you we should never, ever interfere in Muggle affairs, remember this story. Each situation should be judged on its own. I did what I thought was right; so did you.

"One last thing. Go to New York. Find one of the people you saved, someone with a spouse and children. Make up some pretext, disguise yourself, and visit them. See what their life is like, imagine what it would be if you'd done nothing. I think you owe that to yourself."

Ten minutes later, Harry was back at his home, thoughts of going to the Burrow gone. He suddenly had a lot to think about.

Chapter One

"Hurry!" shouted Hedrick breathlessly. "He just ran into the Forbidden Forest!"

The other nine Slytherin seventh years ran as fast as they could, passing Hagrid's hut. Derek, the fastest runner, was five meters ahead of the others, closing in on the first trees of the forest. "Slow down, Derek!" yelled Helen. "We have to be together, you can't go out—" She cut herself off as Derek went down from a Stunning Spell, and whirled on Sylvia, who had cast it. Raising her voice even more, as the others skidded to a halt, she demanded, "What did you do that for?"

"Do your Reveal spells," she responded calmly, seemingly trying to suppress smugness in her tone. The others did the spell that showed objects hidden by magic, and they saw a very thin rope fifteen meters long and a foot above the

ground, tied between two trees. Derek had been a second away from it.

"Oops," muttered David.

"A booby trap," said Hedrick unnecessarily.

"Who knows what it would do, but let's not find out," said Sylvia as she revived Derek. "Professor Shady had obviously been planning this escape route for some time, just waiting until he could get the Ring. We have to hurry, but we have to be careful. Can you walk, Derek?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay," he said, shaking his head and slowly getting to his feet. "Nasty Stunner you've got there, Hermione," he added with a grin. He and a few others had given Sylvia that nickname, they claimed, because she got far better grades than the others did, though she still suspected it had to do with the traits of Hermione's that had annoyed Harry and Ron for so long. In any case, she had decided to take it as a compliment.

"Professor Granger is going to overhear you saying that one of these days," she warned him. "Come on, let's go, around those trees. I guess I don't need to tell you—"

"Keep checking with Reveal, yes, you don't need to," interrupted Edward. They took off again, five going around each of the two trees to which the rope was tied.

"Could've yelled, 'Hey, Derek, stop,'" Derek muttered to Sylvia, running next to him.

"Yes, because you're so well-known for doing what I tell you to do," retorted Sylvia, through heavy breaths.

"Not only you," he responded.

"Whatever, you were about to trip the thing. I couldn't take the chance."

He grunted, but didn't respond. "Hey, couldn't he have just Apparated away by now?"

"He can't Apparate, and neither can we, right here."

"And for that matter, why didn't he just grab a broom? He could've—"

"Stop talking so much, you'll get winded more quickly."

"You mean, you will. I'm fine," he said with a smile. "It's just that if I thought I was going to have to get away quickly, I would've—"

Half of the students shouted in alarm as they suddenly left the ground; in a second, all ten were hovering about five feet in the air.

"That's not fair!" said Sylvia indignantly, as she flailed around, finding that there were no trees anywhere near her grasp. "I was checking!"

"Must've been a physical booby trap that didn't need to be magically hidden, so Reveal wouldn't uncover it," suggested David calmly. "We need someone to conjure a rope. Helen?"

"Dad's been working with me on an Attaching Rope. I'll do my best." She left unspoken that the best she'd been able to do was to conjure a rope that didn't Attach, but hopefully that would do. "I wish I could call Hal."

"Or Fawkes, or Red, for that matter," agreed Sylvia. "Too bad we can't. Nice rope!" she added encouragingly to Helen.

"Let's see if it works," said Helen doubtfully. She sent the end to a tree ten feet away; the rope hit the tree's trunk and fell to the ground. She sighed. "Well, it's a rope, anyway."

"Good enough," said Hedrick as he magically sent the end of the rope in the air and caused it to loop three times around a thick branch. "Ladies first." He held the rope and gestured to Helen; she grasped the rope with both hands and worked her way along until she was outside the field of the Hover Charm. She and the rope fell, but Hedrick's weight broke her fall somewhat, and her weight pulled him to the ground; she helped pull him out of the field. They then passed the rope to the others, pulling them out while putting a weak Hover Charm on them so they floated to the ground.

"Well, that was fun," said Derek sarcastically. "He's probably gotten clean away by now."

"I think we can still catch him," said a determined Helen. "Come on."

They broke into a run again, this time spaced further apart so that if they hit any more booby traps, a few wouldn't be affected. They had run for three minutes when Matthew pointed skyward. "Look!"

A very large bird swooped down toward them... or, it looked like a bird, until as it landed they noticed its body. "A hippogriff!" exulted Vivian. "That's wonderful!"

"'Convenient' might be a better word," cracked Derek.

"Don't complain," chided Sylvia.

"Yeah," added David with a smirk, "don't look a gift hippogriff—"

"I knew someone was going to say that," said Derek, rolling his eyes.

"Sssh!" admonished Helen. "Go ahead, Hedrick. You did well with the one in class, back in third year."

Shrugging, he stepped forward slowly, came to a stop, and slowly bowed. The hippogriff, haughty, showed no reaction for a few seconds, then squawked loudly. A startled Hedrick stepped back quickly. "What did I do?"

"I'll try," suggested Augustina. She stepped forward, bowed, and got the same result. Raising her eyebrows in surprise, she retreated.

"It's got to like somebody, let me try," said Helen. A few seconds later, the hippogriff bowed in return, and she happily stepped forward to pet it. As she did so, another hippogriff flew into view and landed. David, Vivian, and Matthew were similarly approved, but the rest were rebuffed as they approached.

"Looks like only four of us get to go," noted Derek. "Two for each hippogriff, works out just right. Guess the rest of us have to continue on foot, unless several more hippogriffs decide to land in the next minute." He looked up at the sky as if expecting it to happen in response to his comment.

"Well, guess not."

"This is good anyway," said Helen. "We should pass him and be able to see him from the air, though it might be tough to see him through the trees. We'll land in front of him, and if he doubles back, the rest of you can catch him. Let's go." She climbed onto the back of one of the hippogriffs, Matthew behind her; David and Vivian took the other one. The other six watched the hippogriffs break into a trot, then take off.

"Hope they know how to steer one of those," commented Hedrick. "I'm not sure I'd have remembered that from the class. Let's go."

They started running again, more of a jog this time; they realized they couldn't run at full speed for very long—physical exercise wasn't exactly emphasized at Hogwarts—and speed was less urgent now that the other four were flying ahead on hippogriffs.

A few minutes later, however, they had another problem. Trotting directly toward them was a group of centaurs; it looked like ten or fifteen. As the Slytherins skidded to a stop, five more approached them from either side. They were surrounded.

"This isn't good," muttered Derek, looking around warily. Half of the centaurs were armed with bows, and a few already had arrows in them, ready to fire.

One centaur stepped out of the pack. "This area is not for humans," he said disdainfully. "Why do you intrude into our private domain?"

"Your private domain?" repeated Hedrick incredulously. "This is a forest! Anybody can—"

Stepping forward next to Hedrick, Sylvia gave him a quick elbow in the ribs. "We're sorry for intruding, but it's really important," she said urgently. "A bad man, a professor from our school, has stolen the Ring of Hogwarts, which is a rare and powerful artifact, and could allow the one who wears it to—"

"Enough! We care not for your human problems," roared the centaur. "You have violated the centaurs' law. We shall confer to decide what is to be done."

"If you'd just let us go back the way we came, we promise—" started Sylvia.

"I said, we will decide," said the centaur, his tone suggesting that his patience had reached its limits. "For now, you will stay where you are." A group of twenty centaurs retreated about ten meters and huddled, leaving only four guarding the students.

"There's only four now," whispered Hedrick. "Maybe we could Stun them—"

"They've got bows!" pointed out Edward.

"And we've got Repulsion Charms," added Derek.

"Absolutely not!" hissed Sylvia. "We were intruding on their grounds—"

"What, they can't just let us off with a warning, maybe help us?" asked Derek, annoyed. "This is a forest, we have every bit as much right to be here as they do."

"Not as far as they're concerned," responded Sylvia. "Don't you remember Hagrid's class on them? They're very proud, and distrustful of humans. But they're not going to kill us. We just need to be patient. They'll let us go."

"We're supposed to be chasing Professor Shady!" said Edward impatiently.

"It's going to have to be the other four that do it," said Sylvia. "We can't use force against them. It could really get them angry, maybe put Hagrid in danger. He comes out here sometimes."

"I really think that Hagrid can take care of himself. But okay, I suppose you're right," agreed Derek, resigned. "I hope the others are doing better than we are."

"There! I saw something moving, just ahead!" shouted Matthew, moving a hand from holding onto Helen's stomach to point.

"Okay, let's go down," she agreed, gesturing to David on the other hippogriff that he should follow her as she urged her hippogriff down.

"Should we Stun him from the air?" asked Matthew.

"No, because he'd retaliate, and he could Stun the hippogriff, which would be really bad for everyone. We have to land first."

They landed well ahead of the fleeing professor, hid behind trees, and waited for him to approach. When he got near enough, they moved out of hiding and shot off Stunning spells at him. To their great surprise, their spells had no effect.

Professor Shady was tall and slim, with short, slicked-back black hair and a goatee. He smiled smugly as he came to a stop and faced them. "Well, you managed to catch up to me, for all the good it will do you. I suppose you are wondering why your spells had no effect?"

The four exchanged glances. "Well, sort of, yes," admitted Matthew.

"If you knew enough to chase me, I'm surprised you didn't know more about the properties of the reason you are chasing me, this ring," said Shady haughtily, holding up his right hand to display a gold ring with a large diamond. "It

renders the wearer immune to any magic, so there is nothing you can do to me; you were defeated before you even left Hogwarts." His smile grew even wider. "But what you also apparently do not know is that this ring, when worn at midnight on the tenth full moon of the year, has the power to utterly destroy the very institution it was created to protect! I shall finally have vengeance on my enemies! Mwahaha!" He cackled gleefully and rubbed his hands together. "Finally, revenge at last... they all looked down on me, questioned my competence to be a professor, but I will have the last laugh..."

The four Slytherins, looking slightly befuddled, had moved closer together. They spoke to each other quietly, which Shady didn't notice as he continued gloating. "Everyone do the Protection Shield, and be ready with other defensive spells," advised Helen. "One, two, three..."

The four suddenly rushed at Shady, who appeared startled; he raised his wand, but the four were already on top of him. They knocked him to the ground and held him down, each student holding an arm or a leg. Shady looked outraged. "Curses! You have foiled my diabolical plot! But one day, I will return—"

"Oh, be quiet," said Helen, rolling her eyes. Looking up as she held down the professor's arm, she shouted, "Is that it? Are we done?"

"I think you have to take the ring off him," suggested Vivian.

"Oh, yeah," agreed Helen. She took off the ring, and suddenly the forest and Professor Shady vanished. The other six Slytherins were now only ten feet away, and both doors of the Ring of Reduction were plainly visible.

"I'm glad it didn't take any longer than that," said Derek, walking towards them. "Talking to those centaurs was pretty boring."

As he spoke, another person entered the Ring. "Sorry it wasn't interesting enough for you, Derek," said a grinning Harry, walking towards the group.

"Wasn't your fault," shrugged Derek. "I blame last year's seventh years, whoever wrote it." Harry chuckled; last year's year-end project for Defense Against the Dark Arts had been to write a scenario to be played out in a Ring of Reduction in which a group of ten students had a threat to face and defeat; something challenging but not impossible. Harry was the only one with the magical ability to create interactive characters within the Ring; the students had created as much of it as they could, and Harry had done the rest.

"I think Derek has a great career ahead of him as a drama critic," Augustina said. "Even while it was going on, he couldn't stop making wisecracks."

"We should play the last part again for him," added Helen. "Which house wrote that, anyway? And that dialogue at the end was deliberately bad, wasn't it? I hope?"

"The Ravenclaws wrote it," answered Harry. "And I didn't ask them, but I assume so. I mean, Voldemort liked to gloat, but he never said 'Mwahaha,' thank God. I don't know what I would have done. But that was the best one. The dialogue aside, it was the most imaginative from a tactical and magical point of view. By the way, you ten have done the best with this so far. The Hufflepuffs didn't think of rushing him, and the Ravenclaws tried to fight their way past the centaurs; the Gryffindors will be trying it next. I liked the fact that to defeat the scenario, you had to do things that

didn't seem natural. Wizards wouldn't usually think of physically attacking someone, and the best thing to do with the centaurs was just stay put, which goes against your instincts."

"Oh, and, 'Ring of Hogwarts?'" mocked Derek. "Couldn't they come up with anything more imaginative than that?"

Harry thought that too might have been deliberately amateurish, but didn't want to say, because he wasn't sure. "Well, you'll have your chance to do better, Derek," Harry assured him. "Yours will be due in... third week of June, so... nine months and a week. Plenty of time."

"I'll write up an outline tonight," Derek said, causing a few of his female classmates to giggle. "I'm really motivated now, after seeing that."

"Okay," agreed Helen, "but it can't be that the beautiful foreign exchange student is kidnapped and can only be rescued by the dashing and witty Derek Wilson."

Derek affected great surprise. "Helen, when did you start studying Legilimency?"

All eleven laughed as they headed for the Ring's exit. "And I suppose she kisses him at the end?" mused Hedrick.

Derek shrugged. "Well, she wants to show her gratitude..."

It was the second Sunday since the new school term had started, and the six of them were all there a half-hour before the six o'clock dinnertime. Dobby was in the kitchen, preparing the meal; all six had long since learned not to try to offer Dobby any help, as he tended to react in a very self-abasing manner, as if to suggest that a lowly being such as himself should not be offered help by the great friends of

Harry Potter, defeater of Voldemort (Harry had made saying the name a condition of his employment), possessor of awesome magical powers, and so forth. So, the six left Dobby to his duties, but tried not to forget to express appreciation for his efforts.

Dobby was not only Harry's house-elf; when Harry had the house built three years ago—his hobby for his first post-Hogwarts year had been overseeing its construction and application of charms and spells to protect, hide, and baby-proof it—Dobby had begged to be his house-elf, pestering Harry every chance he got. Harry knew he would eventually accept, so he imposed some conditions, the most important of which was that Dobby was to consider himself the house-elf of two houses: Harry's, and the Burrow. Although Dobby adored the Weasleys only somewhat less than he did Harry himself, he was reluctant because it was so unconventional for a house-elf to belong to two homes. He eventually relented, as he did to Harry's demands that he accept wages of twenty Galleons a month and five days off a month. Harry had persuaded Dobby to accept by pointing out that Dobby hoped that other house-elves would one day be free as Dobby was; surely when they saw how the great Harry Potter treated his house-elf, other house-elves and masters alike would see the wisdom of the idea. Dobby, of course, happily agreed, though he found it hard to get used to so much time off. Molly had been skeptical at first, but agreed to start slowly handing off chores to Dobby, especially those relating to the adult children living at the Burrow.

Shortly after Harry and Ginny had taken up residence in the new house, a tradition had been established: the six would meet for dinner every Sunday night at 6:00. Ron and Neville had arranged their Auror schedules, and Pansy her St. Mungo's schedule, to avoid working on Sunday evenings. Occasionally they would have guests: sometimes Aurors

(especially Kingsley, Cassandra, Winston or Tonks), Hogwarts teachers (with Neville's reluctant permission, Harry had even invited Snape once; he had declined), fellow students, or old family friends like Remus. Tonight, they had a guest who was visiting the home for the first time.

Harry gave Luna an enthusiastic hug when she arrived; she got hugs or kisses on the cheek from the others. Harry gave the tour of the house that he'd given over a dozen times before: the game room; the two guest rooms, each of which was expandable to five, if desired; the backyard swimming pool which was not only self-cleaning, but automatically denied access to anyone less than a meter tall. They finally sat down to dinner, which was lasagna; it tended not to be served at Hogwarts, but Ginny had been encouraging Dobby to expand his culinary expertise, and Dobby had eagerly accepted the challenge. Ginny got a chuckle from everyone by explaining that Dobby next intended to tackle Chinese food.

"So, Luna," said Pansy, "you were writing for your father's magazine after you graduated, right?"

Luna nodded as she buttered her French bread. "He didn't ask me to do it, but I wanted to, at least for a while; I wanted to see some of the interesting stuff out there. I also discovered that some of what the Quibbler prints is a bit more... speculative than I'd thought." Harry tried to suppress a grin, and a glance around the table told him he wasn't the only one. "I know how it's regarded, of course, but it does get a lot more things right than people think it does. It was strange, but some of the people I interviewed actually knew who I was. It seems that being the first person outside you six to use the magic of love made me a little bit well-known.

"Anyway, after that, I went traveling not for reporting, just for myself. I wanted to do what you said Professor Dumbledore did after Hogwarts, and like him, I spent a long time in Tibet. They were very kind people, and the nature was lovely. It was very peaceful, and a great experience." She took her first bite of the lasagna.

"What did they teach you?" asked Pansy.

"They don't really teach you, exactly," explained Luna. "It's more like they help you work out how to get in the right frame of mind to learn things yourself. It's a little like when you teach the magic of love, Harry, only more intense. Or do you still call it the 'energy of love'?"

Harry shrugged. "Yes, but either is fine."

"Also, like your class, it's more something you decide to do than something you try to learn. I made a lot of progress; it was really good."

"So, you got in touch with the... 'spiritual realm'?" asked Neville, who apparently had to struggle to remember the term.

Luna nodded. "They were surprised at how fast I was able to do it; they say that some people stay for years and find it difficult. I'm sure the practice from your class had something to do with it," she added, to Harry.

"I think it's more that you're a natural," he responded. "I hope this isn't too personal, but I'm wondering, did you ever talk to your mother?"

Luna didn't seem disturbed by the question. Not as 'spacey' as she used to be, thought Harry, but just as serene, maybe more so. "Yes, it was good to do that. She said she was sorry

to have to leave me and Dad, but it was just her time to go. Of course, I understood that; by the time you get to the point where you can talk to spirits, you pretty much understand how that works. There's just a time when we're supposed to go, and it's always for a reason, even if it's one we down here can't really understand."

Neville looked curious. "Do you mean it's a kind of predestination?"

She thought for a few seconds. "Yes and no, it's hard to explain. It's not predestined in that we have free will... from our point of view, the future isn't decided, but from the point of view of the spiritual realm, everything already has happened and is happening. They're kind of outside of time."

Harry chuckled. "This really takes me back to when Albus was talking to me every night. I'd be confused every time he tried to explain this to me. Eventually, I sort of understood it in my brain, but never really 'got' it, not like you have. But, can I ask you... you said it's always for a reason that someone dies. Did you find out the reason for your mother?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly, but it doesn't matter. Now that she's there, she knows the reason, and it has more to do with her than me. Anyway, she's been reincarnated, so she's back again now."

"Really?" asked Neville. "Do you know where she is, who she is?"

"I think we're not supposed to have that information," replied Luna. "It's not important for me to know, anyway. I was just glad to have a chance to talk to her."

Ron was puzzled. "But if she's living again, how is it you were able to talk to her? Wouldn't she not be there, because she's here?"

"A part of her is there," said Luna. "Also, they're outside time, so it wouldn't matter whether she'd been reincarnated yet or not, I could still talk to her."

Harry smiled at Ron's puzzlement. "Yes, this really reminds me of Albus."

"How about you, Harry?" asked Luna. "Did you ever talk to Sirius, or your parents?"

Harry became somber. "No, I didn't. I understand the spiritual stuff okay, but I never got to the point where I could contact them from here. Albus said it was possible, but really rare that people can do that, and I never put the effort necessary into it. I guess I always felt like I had too much else to do. But I don't regret not doing that. I know they love me, and I love them, and that's all I really need to know."

Luna ate more lasagna, and nodded. "Well, I suppose this isn't the usual dinnertime topic of conversation," she observed. "How about you? How's James doing?"

A smiling Ginny answered. "Adorable, as usual. He has so much energy, it seemed like he could run as soon as he could walk. Right now he's with Mum, and he's a handful even for her. But she just loves him to pieces, of course. He's... well, I should stop before I get too far; I've been told I ramble on about him way past the point where anyone's interested. But he's doing just great."

"We're trying to raise him a bit differently than most kids," added Harry. "He's never seen a wand, and we're going to try to keep it that way for as long as possible."

Luna nodded, understanding. "You want him to learn to do magic without a wand, since you now know it can be done. You want him not to think he needs one."

"That's right. Ginny doesn't use a wand around him, and I sit with him and do simple spells, like turning blocks different colors, and Summoning things. I tell him that when he's a big boy, he'll be able to do it too. Knowing how interested little kids are in getting their hands on anything that moves, I have a feeling he'll do it if it can be done, and I'm sure it can be. And if he starts doing it..."

"You'd start a whole new way of parenting, like you've already done with teaching magic," finished Luna. "But this isn't connected to your unique abilities, is it, even though you found out you didn't need a wand at the same time that you realized you could do anything that could be done by magic?"

"Yes, exactly," agreed Harry. "People often get confused about that. The two things have nothing to do with each other. Only I can do the second thing, but I'm convinced that anyone can do magic without a wand, if they weren't raised to think they needed one."

"The Magical Research Institute's opinion notwithstanding," said Hermione, in a gently teasing tone.

Harry quickly rolled his eyes. "They think it's just me," he explained to Luna. "They've tried not using wands themselves, and no matter how much they try, it doesn't work. I don't care what they think, though. Which Hermione knows, of course, she's just having a bit of fun with me. Researchers don't like it when they ask you questions like, 'how do you know such-and-such?' and you answer, 'I don't know how I know, I just know.'"

Luna smiled. "I can imagine." She turned to Ginny and asked, "Ginny, what about you? Are you still playing Quidditch?"

"Starting Chaser for the Chudley Cannons, Ron was so proud when I became a starter after only one year," said Ginny, with a teasing grin at her brother. "It had to be the Cannons, of course. I had to take a pregnancy break when James came along, but it wasn't too long. Mum's been spending a lot of time looking after James. I may quit, or take a long break, after I've had two or three kids; there are a lot of practices, and I don't want to burden her too much. She still insists she'd be happy to do it, of course."

"How about you, Ronald?" asked Luna, to the others' amusement. "You're an Auror now, you and Neville?"

"I just finished my first year out of training," said Ron. "Neville's been out of training longer, since he got credit for the training he'd already done with them. So, technically, he's senior to me. Not that he'd ever bring it up, mind you."

"Only in fun," agreed Neville, deadpan.

"Yes, so, only a few times a day. It's fairly quiet being an Auror now, though. I think that since Harry became Mr. Can Do Any Magic He Wants, the English criminal element has fled to other countries. He's caught a few people that Aurors never would have, though unfortunately a few have gotten off from lack of evidence. 'Harry knows he did it' apparently doesn't stand up at the Wizengamot as evidence, but the Ministry made a big publicity deal about some captures he made, and could get evidence for. They wanted just the threat of him to deter people, and it seems to be working; magical crime is way down. We Aurors keep occupied, like with continuing training, but the older ones often say, 'it's

not like it was in the old days.' Sometimes I think they miss it."

Luna knew her next question was a personal one, but she let her curiosity get the better of her. "I'm wondering, Harry... you use your abilities to stop crime in England... you could use it for other countries just as easily, couldn't you?"

A look came to the faces of the others, as if reminded of something they hadn't thought about for some time. "The slippery slope," said Hermione quietly.

"Yes, Luna, we've had this conversation a few dozen times—not that I mind, mind you," he added quickly. "It started—you weren't here when this happened, but—"

"The Twin Towers," she supplied. "I was with the spiritual realm when it happened," she added, deciding not to explain why she was there at just that time; her sense was that the First didn't want her to tell people about him. "I got a few images; one was of you on that rooftop, getting people out of there. Another was... how you felt about not getting everyone out. I guess I wondered if you came to some conclusion about that."

Harry took a deep breath. "Nothing definitive, or official, you could say... I'm just going to keep what happened in mind, and do what I would naturally do. I don't look for people to help, much as part of me would like to. I know I can't go around doing everything."

"Wouldn't it be much easier, " suggested Luna, "if you just decided you'd do no more than an ordinary wizard could do, in every situation? It must be painful to make these decisions, every time you're faced with one. This way, you wouldn't have to make decisions, you'd have already done it."

He nodded. "Believe me, I've thought about that. But if it was something that involved danger to someone I loved, I know I couldn't do it. So I shouldn't make promises to myself that I know I can't keep. Then, it's just a matter of where I draw the line. I know I have to keep making that decision. Yes, it's not easy, but I just don't think there's anything else I can do. I think Albus would have done what you're suggesting. He would have been able to do that. But I can't."

There was silence for a moment. Changing the subject a little, Luna asked, "Was there any fallout from that? Did you get in trouble?"

"It was debated," said Hermione, "but Harry being Harry, he wasn't going to be charged with anything, and Professor Dentus told us that he didn't think Harry even lost much if any popularity. A lot of people trust Harry implicitly, and so felt that if he did it, then it must have been the right thing to do. Arthur had to answer some questions, too—oh, I guess you wouldn't know that. I think it was around the time you left England. Ron and Ginny's father, who was head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, got a pretty big promotion. One of the Undersecretaries stepped down, and Arthur was put in his spot and made head of the Muggle Liaison office."

Impressed, Luna raised her eyebrows. "Wow. Was it because—I mean, no offense, but—"

Ron waved her off. "Yes, it was because of Harry. Bright didn't make any pretense otherwise. Dad was never ambitious or conniving, didn't make any enemies, and that made him perfect for the job. See, because of Harry's popularity, he's had influence at the Ministry for a long time—one word from him could change public opinion about something, even though he hardly ever does it. Since Harry would never take a position at the Ministry himself, Bright

thought it made sense to have someone in an Undersecretary position who more or less filled in for Harry, and who had his trust. Dad is sort of... a proxy for Harry, is the word Dad used. Like Harry, Dad will want to do what's right, without regard for his career. If Dad says something publicly, people will not necessarily assume Harry told him to, but at least that Harry has no objection to it. Dad talked to Dentus before accepting the position, and Dentus thought it made sense. Dentus had been wielding Harry's influence before, but he didn't have an official position. Now Dad does, though Dentus still has influence. Seems Harry has enough influence to go around."

"Only because I haven't had to spend it yet," muttered Harry. "I told Arthur he can do whatever he wants, he doesn't have to ask me. He deserves the position, he should have gotten it just for who he is."

"As Archibald would say, it would be nice if the world were like that," pointed out Hermione. "But you have spent influence, Harry. The werewolf thing."

Ron explained. "Some time after defeating Voldemort, Harry decided he was going to do something about the awful way werewolves were treated legally, and thought of by the population. A long article in the Prophet, a few public meetings, and other things like that that Harry generally hates to do. Pretty much by himself, with Dentus giving him advice on how to do it, Harry not only got the Ministry to repeal the laws that restrict what kind of jobs werewolves can get, but helped set up a system where werewolves register, and every full moon can go to the Ministry to get their Wolfsbane potion, and they put them up for the night. Then Harry and Remus did a big publicity campaign, encouraging werewolves to register. It was really successful, and it even ended up that werewolves gained some

sympathy among the public, since they had a better idea of what it was like to be one. It didn't hurt that there hadn't been any werewolf attacks for a while."

"Technically, I didn't 'spend' my influence, because I didn't end up losing any," Harry added, to Hermione. She sent through the link that she remembered, but let him continue, for Luna and the others' benefit. "In fact, Archibald told me that I ended up even stronger politically than when I started, because the politicians saw that if I wanted to do something and put my shoulder into it enough, I could get it done, and that means something to politicians. Naturally, after that, they'd occasionally come to Archibald wanting me to support this or that, and he'd have to explain to them that I was only going to do that if it was really important to me. But it was very rewarding to get that done. Not only that Remus was happy, but I got letters from people who what I did helped, from their parents. It felt good."

"That's really good," said Luna. "That was pretty interesting. I don't know that much about politics, though."

Harry chuckled wryly. "Wish I didn't, I just didn't have any choice. I suppose I shouldn't complain, though, since it helped me do something like this."

"And what's been happening with you, Pansy?" asked Luna. "Oh, I heard about the phoenix, congratulations. Are you and Ronald still together?"

Pansy smiled politely and patted Ron's hand. "Yes, we are. We're engaged now, but there's no date set. We're thinking of next spring." Harry wondered if he had imagined a fleeting look of unhappiness when Luna had said the words 'still together', as if it had reminded her of recent events; only two months ago, Ron and Pansy had a serious argument

that had resulted in them living apart for nearly a month. To the others' relief, they worked it out, and the time apart only reinforced their commitment, and on getting back together, they decided to get married.

"That's wonderful, congratulations," said Luna happily.

"And thank you for not asking if we're doing the Joining of Hands," added Ron wryly. "You wouldn't believe how many people ask that, just because those four did."

"Oh," said Luna, looking taken aback. "Well, I was going to ask, but now I suppose I shouldn't." After a few seconds of silence, she smiled, and the other six laughed. "How about you, Hermione?"

"Fine, thanks. My life isn't very exciting. The only thing I do besides teaching is a little magical research, trying to work out which of Harry's spells can be done by any wizard, which can only be done using the energy of love, and which can only be done by him. It's slow going, and of course as Harry mentioned he can't tell us how he does it, except just by knowing he can. It doesn't help much. But I've gotten a couple to work, and it's a worthwhile endeavor. How about you, Luna? What will you be doing now that you're back?"

"I'm going to be doing some free-lance reporting for the Prophet. I want to do a long-term story, something where I spend a lot of time around some people at the Ministry, then do a long report about their jobs, what they do every day. Coincidentally, it's with someone who works in the Muggle Liaison office. I talked to Colin, he said I could follow him and Dudley around for a while."

Ron looked curious. "I've heard Dad talk about it, of course, but he talks more about management-level stuff. What do the people in that office actually do, anyway?"

Luna looked satisfied. "Well, good. At least there's one person who'll be interested in reading my article. I'm looking forward to finding out myself."

Dudley Dursley stepped out of the fireplace in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and walked away quickly so the next person to use the fireplace didn't run into him from behind, which happened when people didn't move after arriving. Like standing in front of an escalator after you get off it, he thought. Any Muggle knows not to do that, but some wizards will just stand there like morons after coming through the fireplace, just because they can't see the person behind them—until they rear-end them, that is. Go figure.

Dudley walked briskly across the Atrium and headed for the stairs, walking up three flights of stairs to the floor which housed the Muggle Liaison office. He'd gotten into the habit when he joined the Ministry; he'd been a minor celebrity because of his connection to Harry, and to his surprise, some people still remembered the last article Rita Skeeter had ever written, in which she detailed Harry's pre-Hogwarts home life in terms none too flattering to any Dursley. People tended to talk to him in the elevator, and he couldn't get away, so he soon started using the stairs, and he continued doing so long after it was necessary (for the sake of exercise, he told himself).

He found it ironic that he'd become entranced with the wizarding world in spite of his parents' intense desire that he stay away at all costs. It was just so... strange, but interesting, and it didn't hurt that his cousin was more or less a living legend in that world, albeit a reluctant one. His parents, knowing Harry's status and how many lives he had saved, had softened their attitude just enough to begin inviting Harry to dinner every few months after he defeated Voldemort, where they succeeded in awkwardly managing to

treat Harry as though he were almost as good as regular people. Their attitude warmed somewhat after hearing three years later that he had saved a hundred people from certain death in the World Trade Center attacks, at which time they'd reluctantly conceded that maybe being a wizard wasn't such a horrible thing (though Vernon had wanted to know why Harry didn't use his abilities to track down the terrorists who had masterminded the attack). Even so, Dudley had no intention of telling his parents what he did for a living. Dudley knew that Vernon wanted him to take over his business when Vernon retired, and Dudley considered it a possibility—after all, a Muggle could only rise so far in the Ministry, Harry Potter's cousin or no—and Dudley wasn't sure he wanted to spend the next fifteen years with his father looking over his shoulder. The business wasn't going anywhere; it would be there for him.

He walked into the Muggle Liaison office and sat at his desk, opening a copy of the Times. He scanned the Home and International sections; his personal inclinations would steer him toward the Sport section, but his job required him to be well-versed in Muggle current events, which he had never bothered to do before. He was in the middle of an article about fraud and abuse in the health-care system when Colin came in, taking a seat at his desk opposite Dudley's. After they exchanged greetings and spent another ten minutes reading—Colin preferred to bypass the print paper and go straight to the internet--Dudley asked Colin, "Was it always this quiet in here? I mean, it seems like these days, we mostly read memos, file reports with no information in them, and keep up with the Muggle news. Not exactly a hard job."

"Well, there's a good start to my article," said an amused Luna as she walked over to them, having just entered the office. "Tells me a lot."

Colin chuckled at Dudley's anxious look as he stood. "Hi, Luna," he said, giving her a friendly hug. "Great to see you again, it's been a long time."

"You, too," she agreed, kissing him on the cheek. Turning to Dudley, she offered a hand. "I'm Luna Lovegood. I was at Hogwarts with Colin and Ginny. Different House, same year."

"Oh, yes, I remember that name," recalled Dudley, shaking her hand. "You're the..."

"Weird one," Luna supplied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to say.

Dudley looked flustered. "I wasn't going to say that," he said, then looked a little more embarrassed as he realized that he had implied that he had thought it.

"You were not," admonished Colin. She raised her eyebrows at him, as if to say, 'Really?' "Okay, well, a little," he amended. "But not that much." To Dudley, in a loud stage-whisper, he added, "I had kind of a thing for her."

"You did not," she retorted with a smile. To Dudley: "He had a thing for Harry."

Dudley laughed loudly. "Yeah, I heard about that."

"It was strictly platonic," Colin countered humorously, with exaggerated dignity. "I saw in him then what everyone else sees in him now. I was just ahead of my time."

"That's his story, and he's sticking to it," jibed Dudley. "Be sure to put that into the article."

"Well, it seems to me that if I put in the article how Colin felt about Harry when he was eleven, then I should also—"

"All right, never mind," Dudley cut her off. Dudley knew that the way he'd treated Harry as a child wasn't a secret, but he didn't especially care to be reminded of it, as plenty of people in the wizarding world had already done so. Colin knew not to do it, at least, and hadn't even done it when they'd first met. "So, you're just going to hang out with us?"

"Not all the time," she clarified. "As you were just saying, that could get boring. But sometimes, especially when you go out to do something. Which I understand does happen occasionally. Didn't you visit the parents of the Muggle-borns who entered Hogwarts this year?"

"Arthur likes to do that himself," Colin explained. "But he'll take one of us with him when he does it; we each did one in July. It was pretty interesting."

"Bit of a shock for the parents," added Dudley.

"Why does Undersecretary Weasley want to do it himself?" wondered Luna.

"Because it's their first introduction to the wizarding world, and I want to be sure it's done right," explained Arthur, having walked through the door in the middle of Luna's question. "Hello, Luna, it's good to see you. Why don't you three come into my office."

They did; Arthur sat, but there were only two visitors' chairs in the office. Colin was about to Summon one from the main office, but Luna conjured a simple one and sat. "Not bad," said Colin. "I never did quite get the hang of that. Nothing that big, anyway."

"Fortunately, this job doesn't require a lot of conjuring," remarked Arthur. "So, Luna, they tell me you'll be spending some time with these two. What will you be doing, exactly?"

"Mainly, seeing what they get up to," she responded casually.

"Good, when you find out, let me know," he replied, in the same vein. Dudley and Colin exchanged a humorous glance. "So, it's just about their everyday lives on the job?"

She nodded. "It was my idea. It's really just because I fancy Colin."

Dudley snickered loudly; Colin gave her a 'very funny' smile. "I assume that won't be in the article," said Arthur dryly.

"We'll see," said Luna, with an amused glance at Colin. "My characterization of his appearance may be generous. But yes, I thought it would be interesting from a reporting point of view. The Prophet wanted to give me an assignment or two as sort of a trial, to see if they like my work or not, but they didn't want to give me anything important. So from their point of view, a look inside the Muggle Liaison office is just about right for that. But I'm hoping that more people will want to read about it than the Prophet thinks."

Arthur gave a mild shrug. "I wouldn't hold my breath, but that would be nice. The boys aren't that busy right now, but maybe we can come up with something interesting for you to see. How long will you be with them?"

"On and off, as much as a month," said Luna. "I'm in no hurry, and I still live with my father, so I don't really need an income."

Arthur raised his eyebrows. "I'd be surprised if you needed that long, but if it'll help, then sure. Is there anything you need?"

"Just a few questions for you, if you don't mind. First of all, how do you find your current position compared to the one you had before, in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office?"

"Well, that one was important—somebody has to make sure Muggles don't get injured by those sorts of things—but this one has much more responsibility. If there's any intersection between the wizarding and Muggle worlds, this office will be in the middle of it. It's our responsibility to make sure things go smoothly if that happens."

"So, the last time it happened," noted Luna, "was four years ago, when those soldiers came to Hogwarts after the magic went out."

"Yes, uh, things did not exactly go smoothly," allowed Arthur. He leaned forward a little, elbows on the desk, rested his chin on his interlocked fingers, then looked up at Luna.

"Going off the record for a minute, that was a very good example of where this office fell down on the job. I don't completely blame my predecessor, because the decision was made in a big hurry. He was called in from home late at night, and didn't have a lot of time to think about it, sit down and think through scenarios. He just got the sense that the Minister wanted it done, and he focused more on getting it done than thinking about whether it was a good idea or not. What happened could and should have been predicted, though, and that's what this office is supposed to do.

"Going back on the record... we hope that if something like that happens in the future, things will go better. Our other main responsibility is making sure that evidence of the magical world doesn't get to Muggles. To take one of many examples, if a wizard lives in a Muggle area and moves, the house or apartment may be sold or rented to a Muggle next.

We have to make sure that everything magical has been removed; it wouldn't do for the Muggle tenants to go to the upstairs bedroom and find a portrait that talked to them. I'm sure these two will be doing that at some point while you're with them. It's important, if not all that interesting. Jack, one of the senior members of the office, has the full-time responsibility of overseeing financial transactions between us and the Muggle world, and Linda deals with other commerce-related matters. Colin and Dudley, as the junior members, do whatever else needs to be done."

"Many big, important things," put in Colin. Dudley quickly nodded in agreement.

"Well, I'm looking forward to seeing that," said Luna. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around."

He nodded as they all stood. "Say hello to your father for me."

"I will, thank you," she said. As they returned to Colin and Dudley's desks, she asked, "So, what's first today?"

"It's really a matter of sitting back and waiting for things to happen," said Colin. "In the meantime... which do you want today, Dudley, Google or Lexis-Nexis?"

"Mmmm... Google, I think."

"Right. See, Luna, in this world of Muggle high technology, if information about magic got out, we couldn't really give Memory Charms and make it go away like they could before. So, we keep our eyes open for things if they do get out, in the hope that it won't get too far. Remember John telling us about the internet in Muggle Studies, but we couldn't use it there? Well, here, we can. Here, let's do a search on your name..."

Shivering in his heavy sweater and light jacket, Hugo Brantell strolled along one of the busier streets in Muggle San Francisco. It was approaching 11:30 p.m., and he'd been told to expect cold even though it was September—technically, summer—but still, the chill surprised him. When he'd mentioned this to a man who worked at the hotel Hugo was staying at, the man chuckled and replied, "If I just had a dollar for every time anyone said that to me..." Must be a typical tourist reaction, thought Hugo.

He'd felt it even more strongly a few hours before, when he'd gone to see a baseball match at the city's new stadium. He'd never even heard of baseball, but he'd been told that it was a 'hot ticket' in San Francisco, and that the 'Giants' (though, he couldn't help but think as he watched the game, they all looked fairly normal-sized) had a good chance at a 'pennant,' whatever that was. The woman sitting next to him—a sandy-haired woman in her late twenties—had taken pity on the friendly but clueless English tourist and explained the rules to him, as well as some quaint local items, such as 'garlic fries' and a 'splash hit,' the latter of which caused quite a stir in the middle of the match.

He'd enjoyed the experience, and the woman's company, but he was saddened as well, as his innate magical ability to read moods and feelings with tremendous accuracy had again told him more about a person than he'd have liked to know. The woman—Jolene was her name—had come to the match with a female friend and the friend's boyfriend, who was supposed to bring a friend of his own (a 'setup', she explained). But that friend had been unable or unwilling to make it for whatever reason, and his ticket had somehow ended up in the hands of the men outside the stadium who sold tickets at whatever highly inflated prices the market would bear. (Annoyed at the time by the fact that the man wanted six times more for the ticket than its face value,

Hugo had decided to set aside strict moral standards for a moment and cast a strong Suggestion Charm, along with a mild Confundus Curse, to persuade the man to sell him the ticket at its face value. Hugo had thought the man was trying to take advantage of an ignorant foreigner, and was mildly chagrined to later discover that the man was simply asking the market price.)

He'd hit it off with Jolene, and on the surface she was cheerful and outgoing. But Hugo detected that she had recently had a bad breakup and that her self-esteem, normally low anyway, was down quite a bit further. She liked him, he was somewhat handsome, and he knew that if he asked her out after the match, she would accept, and they would end up in his hotel room. He knew she wanted validation—to be desired by someone she found attractive—and was in a bad enough mental place that she would find it in a one-night stand; she either didn't know or care (Hugo couldn't tell which) that it was destructive in the long run. Hugo was tempted, and as a young man had more than once taken advantage of such opportunities his abilities afforded him. But those memories disturbed him, and situations like hers saddened him. So, before she could ask him out, he worked into the conversation that he had an early flight the next morning, and when saying goodbye made sure to suggest that the original owner of the ticket had missed much more than an exciting match. As he left the stadium, he wished for perhaps the thousandth time that he hadn't been born with his particular abilities. And that he'd worn a heavier jacket.

He entered his hotel room and performed a heating charm on his clothes. It was his second day in San Francisco, and he intended to spend two more before moving on. He'd received a sizable inheritance two months ago when his mother died, and he'd decided to take a year off from

journalism and travel the world, focusing mostly on Muggle areas. Hugo found the Americans a warm and extroverted people, and was happy to spend time talking (mostly, listening) to them. But he had asked some people about the event most Americans referred to as nine-eleven, and was disturbed at the reactions he got, especially the ones his abilities picked up. He could tell that most Americans had been deeply affected, even if no one they knew had been lost. Many wanted revenge, and they weren't too particular about whom it was inflicted on, so long as a person with a turban was on the other end of it. He decided to stop asking people about it; he had learned enough, he felt.

He changed into his nightclothes and got under the covers. Tomorrow he would visit no tourist places such as he had the last two days, but would simply walk all over the city, taking in its everyday sights and events. He rolled over onto his side and went to sleep.

He awoke, and slowly became aware of the fact that he was no longer in his hotel bed. He was on a floor, a carpeted floor of what appeared to be a living room. Startled, he reached for his wand, which was not where he kept it, or on his person. He then looked up and saw a man sitting in a chair, reading. Hugo's movements had attracted the man's attention, and he put down the book.

The man was a little short, perhaps a hundred and seventy centimeters. He had light brown hair; his eyes were slightly larger than usual, but otherwise his face was unremarkable. His eyes were dark and cold; Hugo had only ever seen such cold eyes on Death Eaters, or Voldemort. But what truly chilled Hugo was the information his unique senses provided him. The man was utterly conscienceless, Hugo saw immediately. He was indifferent to the suffering of others, and was highly intelligent and calculating. He was engaged

in a game of chess in which the world was his chessboard, and the pieces irrelevant and disposable. He valued control; he needed to control everyone and everything around him. Hugo also saw that he would not be leaving his captivity anytime soon, and he knew with sickening certainty that if he found a way to take his own life, he should do so; it would surely be preferable to what awaited him.

"Please sit," the man said, gesturing to a chair. His tone was neither friendly nor unfriendly, and it too chilled Hugo. "I would have had you in a chair, but unconscious people tend to fall out of chairs." Hugo did as he was told, and took the nearest seat. "Now," the man continued, "let's see what you've picked up since you woke up."

He touched his wand; Hugo understood he was casting Legilimens on Hugo, getting his memories of the past minute. The man let out a low whistle. "Fascinating, how much information you got, so quickly. I knew about your abilities, of course, but seeing it directly is something else. You'll definitely be very useful." Hugo thought to say that he would do nothing the man asked, but quickly realized he was in no position to say any such thing. Only an enormous mistake by this man would result in Hugo's freedom, and the man did not seem the type to make enormous mistakes.

The man cast Legilimens again, then nodded. "Yes, your understanding of the situation is quite accurate. You will be useful to me; your wishes are irrelevant. But since we will be working together—" Hugo saw the faintest wry smile—"I should tell you a little about myself, and what you'll be doing.

"My name is Leonard Drake. I would say 'my friends call me Len,' but I have no friends, though there are a few I allow to

feel they are because it suits me. I also have no family, and that in a way is the crux of my story.

"My mother died when I was very young. Killed—of all things—by a Muggle, if you can believe that. A man pointed a gun at her, tried to rob her. At some point—we could never find out for certain exactly how it happened, of course—she tried to reach for her wand, and he shot her. Bad as that was, what was worse was that he went unpunished. The law is that in such incredibly rare instances, the Muggle criminal justice system deals with such events, and in this case, the Muggle was let off on some technicality.

"I'll skip over much of my not-quite-fascinating life, but I will say that I was rather close to my father and my brother. Now, five years ago—I should say that they were both rather interested in magical artifacts; call it a hobby—they were offered the opportunity to purchase some rather interesting artifacts, which also happened to be illegal. My father and brother placed a little too much trust in someone they didn't know well, and were caught and arrested. I should say, they were entrapped; it was a setup all along. My father was a Legilimens and thought he would see through such a thing, but the person who set the trap was an Occlumens, and rather a good one. My father and brother were sentenced to six months in prison.

"A few months later, in early December, Voldemort broke everyone out of both American wizard prisons, Dad and Rob included. Though 'kidnapped' may be a better word, since they were not exactly free, to put it mildly. Voldemort expected everyone he took to join him. Dad and Rob weren't inclined to, but it was made clear to them that they would be killed if they didn't. They reluctantly agreed, and Lucius Malfoy was put in charge of their assimilation into the Death Eaters.

"I'm also a Legilimens, and an Occlumens; my magical power for standard spells is no better than average, but I've always had great aptitude for spells affecting the mind. Against the possibility of being caught, Dad occasionally had me put Memory Charms on him and Rob, as they had information they didn't want the magical authorities taking from them. The Legilimens working for the Department of Magic aren't supposed to do that, but they've been known to anyway. Voldemort, however, was most unhappy that Dad and Rob had Memory Charms; he didn't want anyone under his command having Memory Charms that he didn't put there. Malfoy told them that if the one who put them there didn't remove them, Voldemort would do it, and none too gently. Malfoy brought them to me and told me that they would die if I didn't remove the Charms. I did so, and did Legilimens on my father to find out what had happened to them. That's how I know they didn't join Voldemort willingly."

Drake touched his wand, doing Legilimens again. "I see we've reached the point in the story where you're starting to guess the rest. Yes, they were captured in the attack on Hogwarts, the one in which Potter came up with the area-effect Imperius Charm. They were then put to death by the Ministry, along with everyone else involved in the attack. I see that you understand that it was an abhorrent miscarriage of justice. They were executed for something they were coerced into doing, and had of their own volition done nothing worse than break a law that shouldn't be there in the first place."

Hugo finally spoke. "My understanding was that Bright told Harry that all those executed had willingly allied themselves with the Death Eaters."

"Yes, I know that. Clearly, he was either lying, or incorrect. I'll probably find out at some point, not that I care a great deal. He is responsible, in any case." Drake did Legilimens yet again, and laughed. "Why didn't I take my grievance through the proper channels, you want to know. You'd have written a story about it, it would have gotten a great deal of sympathy. I see that you would have done that, but it wouldn't have made any difference, not in the long run. People in England had been terrorized by Voldemort and they wanted revenge; they weren't all that particular about who was on the receiving end of it." Again, Legilimens. "Yes, not unlike the Americans after nine-eleven. A good analogy. So though I hold certain people, such as Bright and Lucius Malfoy, more responsible than others, everyone is generally responsible, for not making sure their leaders took care who they killed. So, I don't mind taking my revenge on everyone, generally.

"But another, better reason I didn't go through channels is... the American Muggles have a phrase, 'going postal,' which more or less means taking leave of your senses and killing as many people as you can, in response to the wrongs you've suffered, the miserable state of your existence, and so forth. Inherent in the phrase is the notion that you've been pushed to this point. Well, a few months after I lost Dad and Rob, that happened to me, in a fashion. Not that I went crazy, or lashed out. I just woke up one morning with the clear knowledge of what I should do, and the will and focus to do it. It was like an epiphany, I don't know how else to explain it. I became cold inside, merciless, as you saw when you first looked at me. I'd had enough of what the world had done to me. I wasn't going to lie down like a sheep and take it."

Hugo felt somewhat reassured that he could say what he was going to say. "You won't get far, whatever you're

planning. Harry will stop you."

Drake nodded thoughtfully. "Indeed he could," he agreed. "I'm working on that, though I don't quite have the answer yet. That will be one of your jobs, to help me find a vulnerability of his that I can exploit. But it's not crucial yet; I'm still in the stage of setting up my dominoes, I'm not yet ready to tip the first one over. Many pieces are in place, though, and one of the Potter Six is unknowingly assisting me already, mostly just with information.

"Well, enough about me. Let's talk about you, and why you're here. I've been planning what I'll do for quite some time, and I've set up an information network, keeping my ears open for whatever might be of fortuitous assistance to me; your decision to take a year to travel alone was one such thing. It had occurred to me earlier that your abilities would be useful, but your sudden disappearance would have drawn attention—particularly from Potter, which I can't risk. I'm staying as far from him as I can get. But your traveling alone... it could hardly be more perfect. You have no family, and you didn't arrange to stay in contact with anyone. Even if I need to keep you longer than the year, others will assume that you just extended your trip.

"You needn't worry about your conscience bothering you about what you're going to do, since you have no choice anyway, and you'll be under the Imperius Curse much of the time. You'll be using your ability on whoever I point you toward, and I'll use Legilimens on you to get what you got. Fortunately for me, your natural abilities don't include Occlumency, and I see you never studied it. I could simply use Legilimens on them, of course, but you can get information instantly, from a distance, without risk of detection. You'll tell me who's a good candidate to be compromised, what their soft spots are, things like that."

Drake now leaned forward in his chair and eyed Hugo carefully. "You're thinking about escaping. You've concluded that it's probably impossible, but you never know when a chance might come along. I did check, but I didn't really need to; anyone in your position would think about that. I would, it's perfectly natural. However, I need to impress on you in the strongest possible terms," he emphasized the words with his tone, "that that is unacceptable. I don't mean that trying to escape is unacceptable; I mean that *thinking* about escape is unacceptable. Now, to some extent we can't help what we think, especially in your situation. But we can train ourselves to think a certain way, or to not think about things."

Drake stood and waved his wand at a door, and to Hugo's shock, Lucius Malfoy walked into the room. Drake's statement that he held Malfoy responsible for his family's fate notwithstanding, Malfoy looked not at all like a captive. Drake nodded to Malfoy, who pointed his wand at Hugo and uttered the word Hugo had hoped never to hear: "Crucio."

Hugo was in blinding, unrelenting pain. He was unaware that he was screaming, unaware of anything except the pain. It went on, and on, and on; it was debilitating. Finally it was over; he was on the floor, gasping. He never noticed having fallen out of the chair. Drake gestured to Malfoy, who left the room.

Drake sat again, his eyes pitiless. "I'm not a sadist," he remarked. "I don't particularly enjoy that. He does, however; it's what he lives for. You're aware of the effect the Cleansing had on Death Eaters." He paused, watching Hugo recover. "Look at me," he ordered Hugo, who did. Drake fixed Hugo with a merciless stare. "You will train yourself not to think about escape, or suicide; you are no good to me dead. If the thought occurs, you will shut it down within one second."

Recall a favorite memory, count to a hundred, do whatever you need to, but don't linger on that thought. I'll be checking periodically, especially at first. If I check, and find that you had the thought and didn't shut it down immediately, what just happened will happen again. It's being carefully timed, and each time it happens, it'll be for ten seconds longer than the last time. Do you understand?"

Hugo swallowed hard and nodded. He would try; he had no choice. No point in thinking about something that wasn't going to happen anyway. But why Malfoy? What was he doing here?

Drake put down his wand. "Good, I see you've accepted the necessity to try. That should save us both unnecessary aggravation, though it may disappoint Lucius; we'll see how that goes. You may need to be reminded once or twice. I was serious about the one-second limit. Two seconds is too much. As for Malfoy, I am exacting my revenge on him; it's just slower and more drawn-out. He didn't come into my service any more willingly than Dad and Rob came into his; I like the notion of reciprocity. I have my hooks well into him; he's not going anywhere.

"Now, I'm going to be viewing some memories for a while, see if I can find anything to use against Potter, or anything generally helpful." Drake cast Legilimens. Hugo felt despair; he was never going to get away, and his abilities would be put to purposes totally opposed to what he believed, be used to ruin people's lives. Not only that, even his mind would not be his own; it could be checked any time. He suddenly had a strange thought: he wished he had taken Jolene up on her unspoken offer. That wasn't going to happen again for a long time, probably never.

A few seconds later, Drake let out what sounded like an amused grunt. "Yes, you probably should have. We've got to take our moments of happiness where we can get them, and I think you've had your last." As Drake continued searching Hugo's memory, Hugo was again chilled by Drake's attitude. Drake wasn't pleased that he was destroying Hugo's life. He just didn't care.

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Next: Chapter 2: Harry considers using his special abilities to become an Animagus quickly; two-year-old James suddenly becomes terrified for no apparent reason.

From Chapter 2: The others exchanged baffled looks. "What was that?" asked Molly, her eyes still wide with alarm.

2. Chapter 2

Author's Note: This story is in some ways of a different style than the two that preceded it. The others adhered to the JKR format, one school year from Harry's point of view. This one covers a period of a few months, and is not from any one character's point of view. There are several subplots, including one from the viewpoint of a high official in the U.S. government as it and he are manipulated by a wizard, eventually endangering wizarding secrecy. The sections involving him may at first seem unrelated to the rest of the story, but be assured that they are not.

Chapter Two

Not for the first time, U.S. Secretary of State Bob Rogers glanced wryly at the name of the restaurant he and his deputy were entering: The Statesman's Club. Are there any actual statesmen in Washington anymore, he wondered. He supposed the last one—the last President who was one, anyway—was the one who'd been in office when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union imploded. "I'm not gonna dance on the Wall," he'd said; he knew it was a bad idea to rub the Russians' loss in their noses when there were plenty of hard-liners around who wanted to reverse what had been done. That President, he recalled as he was led to the V.I.P. room in the back of the exclusive restaurant, lost his bid for re-election; one of the only two to do so in the past sixty years, and the other one who had was a very effective statesman himself. Rogers wondered if the meaning of 'statesman' should be considered to be 'one who is better at statecraft than at politics.' Could one be good at both? The last two-termers who'd been good at statecraft had turned out to be a crook. It's always something, he thought.

They sat at the table, gave their drink orders, and were left alone. "What's on your mind?" asked Will Davidson, the Deputy Secretary of State and Rogers' friend for many years.

"Just wondering if the President would've danced on the Wall."

Davidson chuckled at the thought. "He'd have done a jig, beat his chest, then mooned the East Germans. What made you think of that?"

The Secretary shrugged. "Must be getting nostalgic. I swear I remember a time when being America's friend meant you shared our values, not that you did what we told you to do and shut up."

"I am not sure, old friend, that there was ever such a time as you describe," replied Davidson humorously, trying to sound older than his sixty years. "Perhaps we put a more sophisticated veneer on it, but since Hitler went down, we've been the boss. And, lest you forget, look at the litany of thugs and murderers we've called our friends. In those cases, 'shared our values' meant 'opposed the Soviets.'"

"Now, there's some perspective," conceded Rogers as the door opened; the waiter set their drinks in front of them, and withdrew. Rogers took a deep breath. "Yeah, maybe it's just the veneer. But I think the veneer means something. This President doesn't give a crap about veneer."

Now Davidson shrugged. "Different times. Our biggest enemies not only don't care about veneer, they don't care whether they live or die. Deterrence kept things stable, but you can't deter a fanatic. Maybe a Dirty Harry President is what we need. There's something to be said for moral clarity. You're with us or you're against us."

Rogers knew his friend was playing devil's advocate. "I don't see why he needed me for this job, then. He could've just gotten someone who'd have told him what he wanted to hear."

"You know perfectly well why," his friend gently chided him. "You're the respectable face to show the world. Your credibility was currency to him, and he's using it up at a rapid clip. Regretting you took the job?" Davidson was mildly surprised, as such sentiments had escaped his boss before, but usually after the third drink; now, he was still working on his first.

Rogers downed the rest of his drink. "Regretting I got this guy for a president." Davidson's eyebrows went up. "Not that the one before him was so much better. He thought too much; this one doesn't think enough. The last guy over-worried about his biases affecting his decisions; this one embraces his biases, and never thinks he might be wrong." He pressed a button to summon the waiter. "He doesn't know the difference between confidence and arrogance."

"Some people like that about him." The door opened, another round of drinks was delivered, and dinner orders taken. Davidson knew that his friend and boss needed to let off steam occasionally, when the frustrations of being senior foreign policy adviser to a president who was disinterested in the nuances of foreign policy got the better of him.

Rogers took another drink, downing half of the new one in a gulp. "Not the people in other countries, but of course he doesn't care about them, which most Americans don't either. It's like he thinks that nine-eleven gave him a mandate to kick anyone's ass he wanted. Afghanistan? Fine. A haven for terrorists. But Iraq? A brutal, evil dictatorship, but not much to do with terror; as we both know, there are a dozen

countries that sponsor terror far more aggressively. Now half the country thinks that Iraq was connected to nine-eleven, because he and the others said it so often, even though it was patently false. We make fun of the Arabs for believing the lie that Jews were warned about nine-eleven, but we're no better. We just believe different lies. So here we are in Iraq, tied down, with terrorists taking potshots at us. The world's image of America is at an all-time low, and nobody believes a damn thing we say anymore. And I have to get up there and defend this, say how the President carefully and prudently weighed all the factors, and we welcome our allies' advice and we want to cooperate with the international community, and we only read Playboy for the articles..."

Davidson chuckled and mimicked the tone of a TV reporter. "In the State Department, the news today is that Secretary Bob Rogers insisted that he only reads Playboy for the articles. International reaction was skeptical; the French Foreign Minister was quoted as saying in response, 'If this is where the Secretary gets his information, it explains a lot about U.S. foreign policy.'"

They both laughed. Sighing, Rogers responded, "No, unfortunately, we get our foreign policy from the Bible. 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the President.' We shall smite the terrorists, and if we can't get them, then anybody in the neighborhood we don't like the looks of. But, by God, we'll smite somebody, because it makes us feel good."

"By the way, that reminds me, I talked to my esteemed counterpart across the pond," said Davidson. "Albert tells me that Barclay's terrified that we're going to find someone else we want to smite. He values the 'special relationship', and he knows it won't survive one more attack. I assured Paul that at this point in time, we currently have no specific plans

to attack anyone that I'm aware of. He was totally reassured and thanked me profusely."

Rogers smiled at his subordinate's deadpan sarcasm. "I assume you also told Paul that the 'special relationship' between our two countries is extremely important to the President insofar as it's convenient to him at the present time?"

Davidson shook his head sadly. "I think he understands that, both he and Barclay. Barclay hopes it can be salvaged for the future. But back to smiting, I think everyone knows we won't be doing any more smiting for a while, if only because our military is overextended as it is, trying to keep order in Iraq." He finished his drink, as did his boss.

"What really disturbs me about Iraq," said Rogers, even though he knew he'd said the same thing to his deputy more than once, "is the fact that this was an optional war, and the declared reasons for doing it turned out to be bogus. So what's to stop, say, China from inventing a bogus reason and invading Taiwan? They'd laugh at us if we tried to lecture them on respecting the sovereignty of their neighbors."

"Yes, but if they'd wanted to invade Taiwan, they'd have done it already, and pulled a justification out of the air. This just gives them a better one, but it won't change anything. You know that."

"Yeah, I know, but it gives people ideas, makes things that once might have seemed unacceptable now seem acceptable."

"It also could bring democracy to the Middle East," said Davidson, again taking the devil's advocate position. "He has the right idea, even if he's doing it all wrong. This could

remake the geopolitical map, and you know the President's a missionary at heart."

"He's got good intentions, I'll give him that. It's just that the way he does things makes it difficult for me to go out there and defend what he does." Rogers sighed. "But he's the President, so I'll keep on doing it." His friend knew that he just needed to vent once in a while.

The venting ended when dinner came, and the two spent the meal gossiping about mutual friends in the diplomatic community.

Sitting in his car after saying goodbye an hour later, Rogers got out his cell phone, and dialed the number he had committed to memory, but never written down. "Policy Consulting Network," came the female-voiced answer.

"Ms. Casey, please."

"Just a moment, sir."

After a pause, another woman came on the line. "Hello?"

"This is Howard. Is Heather available, in thirty minutes?"

"Yes, sir, she is. She'll be expecting you." They hung up.

He started up the car, wondering which was more ironic: a high-class brothel going by the name of the Policy Consulting Network, or a Washington restaurant called the Statesman's Club. He drove off, trying not to think about the fact that the woman he would soon be having sex with was almost young enough to be his granddaughter. His was a stressful job, he told himself, and he deserved whatever outlets of relaxation he could get. He did not know that he'd had uninvited guests in attendance in the private room at

the restaurant, and at the apartment he would soon arrive at.

American wizards, having similar libertarian leanings to their Muggle counterparts—at least, the Muggles did until recently—did not have a centralized system of nationwide magic detection, and far fewer regulations than the Brits regarding what magic could be done where and under what circumstances. If a man wanted to do charms on his goat, well, that was his business. The state wasn't going to get involved.

There was, however, one exception: Washington, D.C. was well-known to American wizards as a magic-free zone. Anyone who did any sort of magic in the District was in violation of wizarding law, and the area was monitored at all times. Not that wizards would be interested in tampering with the Muggle government in any case, but it was a reasonable precaution, and D.C. wasn't an area that would hold the interest of wizards anyway. Wizards in the American Department of Magic felt that the monitoring was a waste of effort, but they did it anyway. It didn't require manpower; an alarm would let them know if the ban was being violated.

After his father and brother's death, Leonard Drake had taken up their hobby of collecting rare artifacts with a vengeance. One of those artifacts was proving very useful to his recent efforts: a device that shielded an area of five meters around the user from magic detection. Drake could not set up a remote device that would capture and record sounds and images from the restaurant and Heather's apartment, as even that use of magic would be detected. But he could do so if he were there himself, so he was: with Hugo, who was under the Imperius Curse. Both were charmed to make no noise, and made invisible. After it was over, Drake Apparated them both to his hideaway, a large

(expanded magically) but hidden structure in the woods of Vermont.

"That was somewhat distasteful. Ah, the things we do to further our goals," remarked Drake sardonically upon their return. "So, his obvious vulnerabilities are his attitude toward the President, and his taste in younger women. Anything else?"

"Not really," replied Hugo, still under the Imperius Curse. "He's aware he's engaging in risky behavior—people like him have been found out by other Muggles—but he thinks he won't get caught. I got the sense of a long-ago scandal, just a whiff of an emotional atmosphere I've come to associate with that, but I couldn't get anything more about that. If it is there, it probably has to do with sexual behavior. He's a 'my country, right or wrong' man, so he serves a President he doesn't respect."

"How far can I push him? At what point will he stop doing what I tell him even if it means his career ends in disgrace?"

"He struck me as the type who would rather die than betray his country," answered Hugo. "It would be best to do it gradually, get him used to the idea that he's not his own master anymore before demanding anything big."

Out of nowhere, a silver ring suddenly appeared on Drake's right ring finger that hadn't been there a second ago. He glanced at it, then returned his attention to Hugo. "I may not need him to betray his country anyway, just nudge it in a certain direction. Very well, you may return to your quarters." Hugo nodded obediently and walked off.

Drake looked at the ring again, and walked to Malfoy's quarters to get his report.

The Forbidden Forest, the hippogriffs, and the again-subdued Professor Shady disappeared, and all that remained in the Ring of Reduction was Harry and the ten seventh year Gryffindors. "Okay, let's head on out," he said. He left, then waited until all ten were out before addressing the class; the ten seventh year Slytherins who composed the rest of the class looked on curiously.

Addressing the Slytherins, Harry said, "Well, the good part is that they did it faster than any other group, including you." The Gryffindors shared pleased looks, but their faces fell on Harry's next comment. "The bad part is, they cheated."

Hedrick and Derek laughed out loud; other Slytherins chuckled. Some Gryffindors were looking at others reprovingly, as if some had objected to what was done but were outvoted. "What's wrong with you people?" Derek jokingly demanded. "We're the Slytherins; if anyone's going to cheat, it should be us!"

"I'll keep that in mind, Derek," remarked Harry.

"How did they cheat?" asked Helen, seemingly trying to keep any amusement at the Gryffindors' expense out of her voice.

"They knew what was going to happen. They avoided the first two traps entirely, and were trying to avoid the centaurs; they apparently didn't know that the centaurs and hippogriffs will appear in front of you no matter which way you go. Then they pretty much showed they knew that spells wouldn't work against the villain; instead of landing in front of him, they dive-bombed him from the air. They were able to defend the hippogriffs from incoming Stunners; Brian jumped off the hippogriff and made a nice tackle. So, good execution, anyway."

He turned to face the Gryffindors; they were trying not to look guilty, with varying degrees of success. "If this had been a graded activity, there would be detentions. Of course, if it had been a graded activity, I'd have taken stronger measures to make sure that someone from another class didn't tell you. Anyway, I'm going to take twenty points from Gryffindor, just on principle, and request that you not do anything like that in the future, whether it's a graded activity or not." Some Gryffindors nodded, apparently relieved not to be given detention.

Harry glanced at his watch. "Okay, I expected that to take longer, so we have an extra five minutes. But I'll just let you go now. See you next week."

A few minutes later, Harry took his usual seat in the staff room; the other teachers were amused to hear the story, except for Hermione. "I'd have given them detention, I don't think it matters whether it was graded or not. It's just the idea."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. But you know how I am about this kind of thing."

"Yes, you're a softie," she responded disapprovingly.

"Just curious, what would the rest of you have done?" he asked the other teachers.

"Same as you, probably," answered Flitwick. "Maybe taken off more points."

Sprout nodded. "I'd have taken the points and given them a lecture about being fair. As head of Hufflepuff, I feel it's sort of my job."

Harry glanced at Snape, silently asking for his thoughts. "Detention," said Snape firmly. After a pause, he added, "Unless they were Slytherins, in which case I would reprimand them for getting caught, and advise them how to make it less obvious in the future."

Hermione frowned, but most other teachers chuckled. "It's funny because it's true," joked Harry. It was about two years ago that Snape had stopped making any pretenses that he didn't favor Slytherins, and it had become something of a joke in the staff room. Harry didn't like it when it came to approving sixth-year students for the N.E.W.T. Potions class—Snape's informal standard was Exceeds Expectations for Slytherins, but Outstanding for other houses' students—but if Harry or another Head of House made a strong case for a student to be admitted to Snape's class, Snape usually acquiesced (though he always made it clear to such students that they were on thin ice in his class, and that the highest level of effort was expected).

"Oh, Harry," said Sprout, "I don't want to forget to ask you... one of my nephews called in my fireplace last weekend to tell me that his best friend is getting married, and wants to have the Joining of Hands done. I explained that you want to talk to them first, so he wondered if you could meet him and his intended sometime soon."

"Yeah, sure," agreed Harry. "I think Saturday's mostly free. You can tell him that I can see him at one o'clock."

"Thank you, Harry, I'll tell him. By the way, did you have a busy summer with that?" More and more people in the wizarding world had been following Harry and Ginny's example and having the Joining of Hands done, and almost all wanted Harry to be the one to perform it. It had taken him a while to be comfortable performing the spell at weddings

at which he knew no one, but since he could simply keep an eye on the ceremony from afar and appear when he was needed, he felt less awkward than he might have otherwise. He was always asked, and usually agreed, to stay at the party afterwards; such gatherings still made him a little uncomfortable, but he always tried to think of Dumbledore and how he would have handled it.

"Not too busy," he answered Sprout. "Two weddings, and... two requests that didn't end up involving weddings, both of them unusual." A few teachers gave him 'well, go on' looks, and he continued. "I got an owl in late July, from a guy who said he wanted to have the joining done and wanted to meet me. So I did, and when I got there I met the one he wanted to have it done with... and it was another guy."

Sprout, Flitwick, and John chuckled; predictably, Snape scowled. "Bet that threw you for a loop," observed John. "That was the first time that's ever happened?"

"Yeah, it was. I was like, uh, okay... I'm sure they knew I was uncomfortable, but they didn't say anything. So I sat and talked to them, asked them how they met, stuff like that, some of the usual questions, and I did Legilimens on them, of course. Turns out they're very much in love, and just want to spend the rest of their lives together, just like most couples I see."

"You say that like you're surprised," Hermione admonished him.

"You know the answer to that, it just takes some getting used to," responded Harry. "You know I don't have anything against it. Anyway, I told them I would do it, and they were really excited. They'd worried I'd be disgusted and wouldn't do it. They had me do it right then and there, since they

can't have a wedding anyway. They were really, really happy after I did it. They know they can't look into their hands and talk to each other unless they're both alone, since if they weren't, people would ask them who they were joined to. I got the sense that since they can't get married, that was as close as they could get, which made it like a wedding for them. So, it was kind of strange, but I was glad I could make them so happy."

"Well, I was very proud of you for doing it," said Hermione emphatically, her tone reminding Harry of Molly praising a child. She looked around the room to get reactions.

Sprout looked mildly uncomfortable. "I suppose I feel much like Minerva does about this. I don't wish them ill, but witches of my generation were raised to think it was wrong."

"Albus didn't think it was wrong," pointed out Harry.

"I know," agreed Sprout. "But he was... exceptional."

"Well, I'm okay with it, I think Harry knows, but I suppose as a Muggle I don't count," said John wryly. "But Harry, I wonder about something. Would you do it at an actual wedding? I mean, it can't happen here, and I think that it's not officially recognized in any other wizarding societies, but I read recently that the wizarding population of San Francisco is starting to take after how open the Muggle population is about it. They're trying to build popularity for the idea, by having unofficial 'commitment' ceremonies—"

"Quite appropriate; they should be 'committed,'" muttered Snape darkly.

John gave Snape an annoyed glance, then continued, "So, if they asked you to do the joining at one of these ceremonies,

would you do it? Bearing in mind that it would be reported in the American papers, and eventually in the Prophet?"

Harry thought for a minute; it was an interesting question. Finally, he answered, "As you know, I don't want my name used to make some point, unless it's one that I personally really want to make. So if the whole point of the ceremony was to get public support for homosexual marriage, then no, I wouldn't do it. But if it was a private ceremony, with no more publicity than an average wedding, then yes, I would."

"Seems fair enough," said John. "So, what was the other one? You said you had two unusual requests this summer."

Harry chuckled at the recollection. "The other one was just a week before we came back from vacation. A couple asked for an interview, then during the interview they asked me if, since I could do any magic I wanted, if I would do the Joining of Hands for them, but modify it so it wasn't permanent. They wanted to be able to talk to each other on their hands, but they wanted to be able to change their minds about it. They said it wasn't because they thought they might break up, but that they might decide the Joining wasn't something they wanted from a privacy viewpoint."

"It seems like it wouldn't really be the Joining, then," remarked Sprout. "What did you tell them?"

"Basically that," said Harry. "I said I could do it, but I wouldn't; to me, the fact that it's irreversible is really what the Joining is all about. Make it reversible, then you've got... I don't know, the Holding of Hands, or something. I'm happy to help people confirm their commitment to each other and make them happy, like that gay couple, but I have no interest in modifying people to give them a convenience. So, I was as nice as I could be, and apologetic, but I said no."

"Have you ever said no before?" wondered Sprout. "I mean, you do what Professor Dumbledore did, you interview them using Legilimens to determine to your satisfaction that they're doing it for the right reasons, since it's irreversible. Have you ever interviewed them, and had to say no for that reason?"

Harry nodded. "Once, last summer. The woman was keen, but the man... he liked her well enough, but he was more interested in men than women. I discovered that there was a man he'd loved once, but didn't pursue it because his father had quite a lot of money he expected to inherit, and his father wanted him to marry someone respectable. It had to be a pure-blood. I wondered why they even asked, since he had to know I'd find that. I figured out that she wanted it—he'd been a little too convincing in acting like he loved her, she thought he wanted it too—and he didn't mind asking because he thought there was a chance I'd say no, and because of that she'd decide to cancel the wedding. It was as much for her sake as his—he felt bad marrying her based on a lie, but couldn't think of a good enough reason to get out of it without hurting her feelings and offending both sets of parents.

"She was really upset when I said no, and he pretended to be surprised. She demanded to know why, and wasn't happy when I told her I couldn't tell her. She felt as though I was predicting their marriage would fail. His father wasn't happy either, and stuck his head in my fireplace to find out my reasons, and I had to tell him the same thing. Unfortunately, it didn't persuade the woman; they got married anyway. I suspect he's trying to make himself happy with his situation, and having occasional affairs with men on the side. It's pretty sad, really."

"It may interest you to know, Professor, that through my awesome powers of deduction," remarked Snape with obvious sarcasm, "I am fairly sure I know who you are speaking of. I am sure it would be of great interest to the father—"

"Don't you dare," Harry interrupted Snape, glaring at him. "You'd better not. I'm serious." He didn't think Snape would do it, but considering Snape's past irrationality on the topic of homosexuality, he couldn't be sure.

Snape's smirk in response suggested that he had been trying to bait Harry, and was amused that he had succeeded. "Or...?"

Harry sighed, now annoyed with Snape for two reasons. "Or I'll be very unhappy."

Snape's eyebrows rose. "My abject fear has reduced me to a quivering wreck," he responded, putting a light touch on the sarcasm in his tone. "I never dreamed that you would go so far."

"Just don't tempt me," Harry muttered, now satisfied that Snape was just making sport of him. Snape's personality had changed when, four years before, Harry had been able to undo the Cleansing that Voldemort had done to Snape; Snape was now able to have any emotions, not only negative ones. Harry knew that considering all he had done for Snape, Snape respected him, but was far from hesitant to tweak him when he saw the opportunity.

"You were a little specific, so you may want to keep that in mind for the future," suggested Dentus. "The wizarding world is quite a small one. I'm pretty sure I know who you mean as well."

"I'll keep that in mind. Anyway, since that happened, whenever I do this I warn the couple that if I say no, I can't tell them the reasons. Hasn't happened since then, of course, but I'm sure it will one of these days."

After a few seconds, Flitwick turned to John. "So, John, how are the classes going?" Since he'd graduated from Hogwarts, Harry had started conducting energy-of-love classes outside Hogwarts for groups of ten. In lieu of a fee, he asked only that the participants who learned it successfully be willing to conduct or assist similar classes in the future if requested. The classes lasted six months, three times a week, starting in January and July. To Harry's surprise, John had asked to join the most recent class. Clearly, as a Muggle, John had no hope of learning the spells made possible by using the energy of love, but he had pointed out to Harry that learning it had a beneficial effect on the person's character, which would be useful to anyone, and that since learning it didn't require the use of magic, he could quite possibly teach it in the future. John told Harry that he intended to teach his wife, who was a witch, if he felt able. Intrigued, Harry had agreed to his request.

"As Harry's said many times before, it's something that's hard to get a handle on," replied John. "All I can say is that it seems to be going well. Obviously with me, there'll be no way to know whether I've really learned it or not. But I have a feeling I'll know, since I've heard many people talk about how it feels. So, how many is it now, Harry?"

"I'm not keeping track of a number; all I know is how many former and current Hogwarts students have learned it. I think that number is close to two hundred. If I had to guess, I'd say the overall number is between five and six hundred."

"Not bad," mused Dentus, "especially considering that it's only been five years since you started teaching it to anyone. Granted, that's less than two percent of England's wizarding population, but it's still good progress. That number's going to be much higher after you've been teaching it for a generation, especially if parents start raising their kids on it, like you're doing."

"That's what I'm hoping for," agreed Harry. "It's slow, but heading in the right direction."

Harry's home was located very close to the Burrow, only about a hundred meters away. He had wanted travel between the two homes to be easy, even for children not old enough to Apparate. The home was invisible, however, except to those authorized to know its location, due to Harry's variation of the Fidelius Charm. While a number of people were authorized for Harry's fireplace and for Apparation into his home, only the six and other Weasleys knew its physical location; the last thing Harry wanted was people showing up on his doorstep.

Having looked beforehand with his remote eye, which he usually did before coming home from Hogwarts, Harry teleported to his living room. Ginny was on a sofa reading a book, and keeping an eye on James, who was on the floor playing with toys. To Harry and Ginny's surprise, and Molly's delight, James had been born with red hair, blue eyes, and freckles; he looked much more like a Weasley than a Potter. Harry appeared in the living room, about three meters from James. He crouched, and spread his arms wide.

"Daddy!" shouted James. "Summa!"

Harry shook his head. "No, first you have to come over here and give Daddy a hug. Then go back over there, and I'll

summon you. Come on!"

James enthusiastically ran to his father, who hugged him. Then he ran back to where he'd been before. "Summa!"

Harry chuckled, wondering when James would get the pronunciation right. He stood and with a thought summoned his son, who went flying through the air towards his father, who caught him. James giggled in delight.

Smiling, Ginny walked over and kissed her husband. "He never gets tired of that, you could do it a hundred times and he'd still want more. Good thing I can't do it, he'd never leave me alone." She would have included the phrase 'without a wand' in her sentence, but they had even gone so far as to decide not to use the word 'wand' around James, who upon hearing of their existence would no doubt want one, and badger them endlessly.

Harry held James up in front of his face. "Is that right? Would you like me to do that a hundred times?" James giggled and nodded, though Harry was sure James didn't understand the concept of a hundred. Harry kissed James a few times, then kissed Ginny again. "It's so nice to have you two to come home to. It sure beats Snape taking his little digs at me."

Ginny gave him a questioning glance, so he explained. Then he added, "He shouldn't joke about things like that, given how weird he is about homosexuality. It wasn't like it was so strange that I'd think he might be serious, but then when it was clear that he was kidding, it made it look to the other teachers like I overreacted. They wouldn't think that if they knew what I know about him, of course."

She shrugged. "You know how he is. He loves to take his shots, especially at you. I think you're his favorite target because of what you two have been through together, you'll

be slow to be offended, and let him get away with a fair bit. I gather that Hermione doesn't take that much off of him."

He grunted. "I think he also thinks of me as the slowest one in the room mentally, and so easiest to do that to. I try to always assume he's not serious, but it doesn't work sometimes, like today. Not that I usually care, just today was annoying. Funny, it's been almost five years since I reversed his Cleansing, but after his initial changes, he hasn't changed all that much. When he laughs, it's still far more likely to be at someone's expense than because he's happy, or because something is just funny. Not that that's not a vast improvement on how he was in my first six years at Hogwarts, but you'd think he'd branch out a bit more with his emotions, now that he has the full range of them again." Harry played with James as he spoke.

"I guess people get comfortable, and don't want to change," she suggested. "Look at McGonagall, four of her teachers can use the energy of love, even John's trying it, but she won't. She's just comfortable with who she is, and I suppose it's the same for Snape, in his own way."

He sighed. "I know. I just wish he could..."

"Love someone? Yes, it would be nice, but really unlikely. He's just not going to put that kind of trust in another person. The only two people he's really trusted have been you and Albus, and both of those were unusual circumstances, driven by necessity. Nothing's pushing him here." Harry knew she was right, it was just a shame. "By the way," she continued, "I was thinking of having Sheila over for a Sunday dinner. What do you think?" Sheila Redmond was a Chaser for the Chudley Cannons, and Ginny's closest friend on the team.

Harry hesitated, thinking for a few seconds. "Yeah, okay." He sat down with James and watched him play with the toys, James showing Harry things he'd done.

"Why not?" asked Ginny, trying to keep her tone neutral.

Puzzled, Harry responded, "I could have sworn I just said it was okay."

"Maybe, but your tone communicated the message 'I can't think of a good reason to say 'no' and I don't want to upset my wife so I'll say 'yes' even though I'd rather not.'"

"Did it really?" They'd had the argument about his tone differing from his words more than once, and Harry protested, though he knew it would be to no avail. "Can't you just go by my words and not my tone?"

"No, I can't. What's your problem with her?"

Harry wished she would just let it go, but he knew she wouldn't. "I don't have a problem with her, really. It's just... I don't know, something doesn't hit me the right way about her. It's no big deal. Maybe it's just me, maybe the others would like her fine. Really, you should go ahead and ask her."

"I'll think about it," she replied, in a tone that suggested to him that she didn't plan to ask Sheila, and was still unhappy with Harry's attitude. Unlike her, however, Harry wasn't inclined to peer beyond her words, at least in this case.

He wished he didn't feel as he did about Sheila, but he couldn't help it; something about her made him a little uncomfortable. In a way he envied Ginny that she had made a new friend; Harry had plenty of friends, of course, but he knew it would be hard to make new ones, since everyone

would deal with him based on his name and reputation rather than his personality. He hadn't made any new friends since he'd defeated Voldemort, and he wondered if he ever would. He turned his attention back to James, and as they played together, he wondered how it would be for James, being Harry Potter's son. Harry hoped it wouldn't be too bad.

Colin, Dudley, and Luna stood, leaving their trays on the table; the house-elves who worked for the Ministry would deal with them. As they walked across the room to the exit, Luna asked, "So, Colin, how are your brother and sister doing? What are they doing?"

"Is this for the article?" asked Colin, surprised.

"Mostly personal curiosity, but you never know when something will be interesting."

"Andrea's still at Hogwarts, she's a seventh year. She's pretty busy, with her studies and two extracurricular activities. She helps lead one of the Gryffindor energy-of-love study groups for the lower years; since she was the youngest Gryffindor ever to learn it, she can show them how to do it better. Also, she's the Quidditch captain; Harry chose her as captain last year, after Dennis, who was captain after Ron, graduated. As for Dennis, he's thinking about following me into the Ministry, but he wanted to give professional Quidditch a try first. He's a reserve Chaser for the Wimbourne Wasps. He says if he doesn't make starter in four years, he's going to give it up."

Luna nodded politely. "I hope he makes it. By the way, speaking of jobs, I remember that all three of you were able to use the magic of love by the end of our last year. Is that any particular advantage in finding a job after Hogwarts?"

"It doesn't hurt," said Colin. "Obviously in my job and Dennis's, it's not that useful. But the Magical Research Institute has created a whole new section to study it, as it relates to new spells and its effect on old ones. Mandy and Padma were the first two members; I think it's up to ten now, all recent Hogwarts graduates, mostly Ravenclaws."

They got into the elevator to return to the Muggle Liaison office; Dudley didn't mind using the elevator as long as other people were with him. "I should go say hello," mused Luna. "I imagine I know most of them. Dudley, how about you? How do your parents feel about your working here?"

Dudley and Colin laughed. "As far as my parents know, I'm working for MI5. That's a Muggle security organization, a little like the Aurors," Dudley explained for Luna's benefit. "It's a good cover story, because I can just tell my parents that a lot of what I do is classified, so I can't talk about it with them. If they knew I did this, they'd... well, I don't know what they'd do. Demand that I quit, disown me, try to put me into a loony bin, accuse Harry of putting a spell on me to get me to take the job—"

"How do you know he didn't?" joked Colin with a mild smirk.

Dudley glanced at Colin in feigned annoyance. "I think he's got better things to do with his time, he'd rather play with his kid. Anyway, they wouldn't be happy. They've barely gotten used to the idea of having Harry over a few times a year." They stepped out of the elevator and walked to Dudley and Colin's desks; Luna sat near them, moving around occasionally to look at one or the other's computer screen.

Fifteen minutes later, Colin's eyes widened. "Oh, my, this is not good..." he said softly, to himself.

"What?" asked Dudley.

"Do a Google search, using 'nine-eleven,' 'bizarre,' and 'coincidence.' It should be on the third page, look for 'vickysblog.'" As Dudley did so, Colin explained to Luna. "We often do searches for words like 'coincidence' and 'bizarre' because if a Muggle saw something magical, those kinds of words are how they'd describe it. And we look for nine-eleven because of what Harry did, to make sure nothing comes of it. Probably nothing will, but..." He glanced over at Dudley.

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Should we tell Arthur?"

"Yeah, best to let him know, I think," agreed Colin. Luna still didn't know what they were talking about, but she assumed she'd find out soon.

"You have a minute, Arthur?" asked Dudley, when they arrived at Arthur's office.

"Sure." Arthur gestured them in; again, Luna conjured her own chair. "What's up?"

"Something we found on someone's blog, its main theme is that the woman survived nine-eleven by a very lucky coincidence. Apparently, through her blog, she's found three other people with very similar stories. She was supposed to go to the Twin Towers for her job that day, but she felt bad before work and stopped somewhere to rest first. Or so she thought. When she talked to her husband later, she discovered that he had talked to her just before the towers fell, and she had called him from her office on the ninety-second floor. She has no memory of it, but he swears it happened, and they could never figure it out. They still haven't, but three other people had the same thing happen to them... and in one case, the woman actually recorded the

conversation with her husband while he was up in the tower. He didn't remember anything about it afterwards, but she had the recording, and he couldn't believe it. Now she's looking for more people this happened to."

Arthur nodded gravely. "These have to be people Harry saved."

"There's no other explanation," agreed Colin. "The blog entry even mentions that in all four cases, their stated reason for not going into the building that morning is something consistent with what might be very usual for them. It makes perfect sense, considering what Harry did with their memories when he saved them."

Arthur sighed heavily. "Looks like Harry made a little mistake. He said he didn't take anyone who was on the phone, but he didn't consider whether they *had been* on the phone since the planes hit."

"What are you going to do?" asked Luna. "Find them and give them Memory Charms?"

"Noooo way," said Colin emphatically. "That would just make it worse, much worse. This is why we check the internet: once it's there, we can't do anything about it. If we adjusted their memories and had them take down their blogs, their readers would want to know why, and it would eventually be found out. No, it's not a matter of what we do, it's a matter of trying to anticipate where this could lead, and stop it somehow."

"I've thought about it, and I don't think there's anything to worry about," volunteered Dudley. "It's weird, but weirder things happen all the time. Even the recorded phone call doesn't prove anything. It's persuasive, but it wouldn't hold up as documentation, since it could have been faked. Even if

Harry hadn't put Memory Charms on them, they couldn't prove anything. Well, okay, a hundred people saying the same thing, maybe. But just these four, definitely not. We should keep an eye on it, but there's nothing to worry about."

Arthur looked to Colin for his opinion. "I agree. No matter who they told, no one would believe them. Muggles get laughed at for believing things less strange than this."

"What do they think happened?" asked Arthur. "These four?"

"One of them thinks it was God," said Colin. "Calls it a miracle. Another thinks it was aliens. The blog writer and the other one don't know what to think, they have no particular opinion. I don't know much more than that, I'd have to read everything she's written for the past year to find out."

"Skim it, at least," said Arthur. "So, worst-case, no damage?"

Colin shook his head. "I can't imagine how. There's just nothing to connect it to the magical world. Of course, the magical stuff is still online—" He cut himself off as Luna glanced at him in surprise, saying, "I'll explain later. Anyway, even if she found that and read it, it would look like fiction, and there's nothing to connect it to that."

"Okay," acknowledged Arthur. "But by all means, keep an eye on it, check out links to and from her blog. Thanks for letting me know."

They nodded and headed back to their desks. "Looks like I've got some reading to do," said Colin.

"Okay, I'll explain the online magical stuff," offered Dudley, turning to Luna. "You probably know that there are some wizards who have a lot of interactions with the Muggle

world, usually through relatives, or just because they like Muggle culture better. When the internet started getting so popular about five or six years ago, some of those wizards got online, found each other, and started communicating that way. To keep wizarding secrecy, since it could be read by anybody, they pretended it was a fictional world, a big ongoing story that a group of them wrote. Because it could be seen by Muggles, they have to be careful not to write anything that connects wizards to the Muggle world. So, for example, when Harry defeated Voldemort, they could write about that, no problem. But when Harry saved the people on nine-eleven, they had to write it differently. I found out later that they had a big online chat to debate how to write it. The problem was that a central part of the story had to do with whether what Harry did would expose the wizarding world to Muggles, so they couldn't really write that, because Muggles would see it.

"So, they decided to write it where Harry discovers that one of his special powers is that he can go to other planets." Luna giggled, then Dudley laughed. "Yeah, it is pretty funny. He's watching these people from a distance when there's a big flood. A dam breaks, something like that. Same concept as nine-eleven: he wants to save everyone, but he realizes that if he does, it could expose the existence of people from other planets, which could destroy their society because it conflicts with their religion or something. I kinda skipped over that part. So, he only saves some, and his society debates whether he should have even done that much. Anyway, you get the idea. Another precaution is that real Muggle names aren't used. For example, they use Hermione's real name because she's not involved in the Muggle world at all, and her Muggle records, like school and doctor records, have been erased. But for me, since I'm still in the Muggle world—so my parents think, anyway, but I still keep in touch with my friends—they can't use my name

online. They did early on, but Arthur asked me to ask them to change my name and my parents' to something fictional, so they did. Now, I'm 'Rodney Rumsley.'"

Luna laughed out loud. "They didn't try too hard, did they?"

"No, they didn't, but Arthur had to be satisfied with that; he wasn't in this job at that time, so he had no authority over them. My parents, who of course are mentioned on these sites, were changed to Daisy and Vincent. They'd love that. Good thing they'll never see it."

"I should read some of these," said Luna. "Too bad my father doesn't have the internet."

"We have a laptop around here, I could set you up," offered Dudley. As he did so, Luna asked, "Why doesn't the Ministry just stop these people?"

"For a long time, they just didn't care," said Dudley, plugging wires into the back of the computer. "They couldn't be bothered. When Arthur became an undersecretary, one of the first things he did was to get them to include the internet in the wizarding secrecy laws. The online wizards were kind of upset at him, because it was like he was trying to stop them personally. They were like, we already fictionalized it, why are you still harassing us? So they basically went underground, stopped communicating with him online anymore, or me, since they knew I worked for the Ministry now. They never used their real names, so he doesn't know who they are, and there's no real way to find out. He was pretty disappointed. He doesn't think anything bad will happen, but he worries about it enough to have us checking stuff like this."

"Couldn't Harry use his abilities to find them?" asked Luna; she knew the answer, but wondered how Dudley would

answer.

"Interesting question... he probably could, but he wouldn't. He doesn't like to use it anyway; he does when it'll help people, but if he gets roped into doing stuff like this, there'd be no end to it. I've heard him say 'I want to have a life,' and after what he's done, I think he deserves it. The only thing he does regularly that uses his unusual abilities is that the head witch at St. Mungo's can call him if there's someone who she thinks his Imperius Charm will help, like he used it for Hermione in the Ring. Other than that, he won't use it, unless he decides he wants to."

Luna nodded. "Okay, thanks, and thanks for this," she added, gesturing to the laptop. "Just point me to the sites, and I'll find my way."

The Sixth Borough was to New York what Diagon Alley was to London: the central shopping and public gathering area for American wizards. There were two in America; the other was in Los Angeles, though there were smaller ones as well, in Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. It was accessible through an alley near Times Square, though most wizards traveled there by fireplace.

A nondescript, balding man in his early fifties made his way out of the Sixth Borough and into the Muggle world, following the taller, slightly older man who had just exited the Borough a minute earlier. The shorter man quickened his pace, hoping to catch the other before he reached the main street, where they would be noticed by Muggles. When he got close enough, he shot off a Stunning Spell. The target collapsed; his attacker rushed to his side, giving the appearance of assistance, should any Muggles happen to glance down the alleyway. The attacker then Disapparated them both away.

He had been following the man for forty minutes, and it had been fifty since he had taken the Polyjuice Potion. Had the hunt taken more than another five minutes, he would have had to drink more from the small container he carried with him. Lucius Malfoy's face was not as well-known to American Aurors as to their English counterparts, but one had to be careful. Malfoy had been lucky that the man had chosen to exit into the Muggle world; had he chosen a fireplace, Malfoy would have been forced to simply kill him, then Disapparate away, which would have deprived him of the pleasure he would now experience. Drake did not care whether the man was captured or not, as long as he ended up dead, but Malfoy cared a great deal. Malfoy, on the other hand, cared not at all that the man he had just captured was the Department of Magic official who had originated and executed the sting operation that had resulted in the arrest of Drake's father and brother.

In his 'quarters' at Drake's hideaway Hugo cringed as he heard the screams begin; through what he was sure were at least three closed doors, they came through loud and clear. For what he was sure was the fiftieth time in five days, Hugo wondered what he had done to deserve what was happening to him. He had experienced two more brief sessions of torture at Malfoy's hands before he had successfully trained his mind not to think about escape or suicide, but what crushed his spirit was what he was being made to do. He was being used as a tool to further the suffering of others. Maybe it was better to resist—no, he quickly reminded himself, you can't face that torture again. The recollections and the emotional damage were vivid mental reminders that he must avoid that at all costs; the screams he continued to hear only punctuated what he knew all too well. His respect for Harry, already extremely high, had increased even more now that he understood directly what Harry had voluntarily faced early in his sixth year at Hogwarts in order to defy

Voldemort. Hugo would do absolutely nothing to invite that again. Hugo wished they would at least Silence the man, then was immediately ashamed at the thought, as he was thinking of his own comfort while another man was undergoing unendurable torment. I guess we always tend to think of ourselves first when we're in a really bad situation. Or is that only me? If Harry were in my position, he'd be thinking about how to rescue that man, even though it's impossible. He wouldn't be thinking about how he didn't want to hear him scream.

They say it's in our darkest times that we find out what we're really made of, thought Hugo. But what does that mean when you have no choice, no options? Does it mean that I should face that torture again and again, even if I could bring myself to do it, just for the sake of resistance when it's utterly pointless? Does doing the best I can mean feeling compassion for that man rather than thinking that I don't want to hear him scream? For Drake, even? Harry had felt... not compassion, but pity, for Voldemort; Hugo could see there was much about Drake that was to be pitied. Everything of value, at least as Drake saw it, had been taken from his life unjustly, until nothing mattered anymore. How badly off you must be, how much you must have suffered, to decide that you want to put others through this... or do some people just have a lower threshold of suffering than others; most people who've suffered what he did wouldn't resort to this, even if they could.

His train of thought was interrupted by Drake's entrance into the room. The screaming became even louder, then diminished when Drake closed the door behind him. Drake pointed his wand at Hugo, as had become routine when Hugo had been in his own mind for any length of time. "I'm not inclined to ponder such questions," said Drake matter-of-factly. Remember that 'going postal' bit. This is my way of

fighting back, much as you'd like to but can't. This is my resistance to the callous world that did what it did to me, to the callous people who didn't care. Why should I not become callous? Why should I care how long that man screams? I don't think of myself as evil, though I'm sure if you checked a dictionary, at this point I'd fit the definition. What's the phrase? 'All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing'? Well, with me, evil triumphed, because supposedly good men did nothing.

"Enough philosophizing; as I've said, it doesn't really interest me. I see that you're worried that I might be upset that you pity me. In fact, I don't care. If I can not care about that man being tortured, I can certainly not care what you or anyone else thinks of me. In that respect, you're welcome to think whatever you want. And yes, I don't really disagree with you about the noise; I don't care that he suffers, as you know, but it is annoying. I could really do without it. I could make Lucius Silence the man, but the noise enhances the experience for him. This is sort of a treat for him, a reward for doing his job well for a certain length of time, and avoiding thoughts I want to discourage. He has been with me for two years now, and is in every sense a slave. You may be, too. There may come a time—a year, maybe less, if it happens—when you could find yourself in Diagon Alley, people all around you, not under the influence of the Imperius Curse, and you would have no thought of escaping; nothing would occur to you but to do what you know I would want you to do. Not because of a spell, but simply, conditioning, made possible by Legilimency. This isn't usually done, even by Dark wizards, because of the tremendous time and effort involved. One must constantly check with Legilimency, and slowly narrow the field of acceptable thoughts, until little remains but to serve. I have not yet decided whether or not it's necessary to do that with you. And believe me, resistance may or may not be noble,

but it would be pointless. Malfoy resisted quite a bit, at first; he was a strong-willed man, accustomed to power. But the Curse breaks everybody; I'm sure it would have broken Potter if he hadn't come up with that shield.

"Speaking of Potter, we're going to be making a trip to England soon. We'll both be using Polyjuice Potion; the closer I get to Potter, the more careful I intend to be. All he has to do is look in my direction and I'm done, so I must make sure that doesn't happen. You'll be under the Imperius Curse the whole time, so you needn't worry about how you'll conduct yourself. We'll probably go tomorrow; I'll be checking you for the best prospects among people he's close to, or people close to those who are close to him. And in the meantime... I'd suggest you try not to think too much." Drake closed the door behind him.

Not much chance of that, Hugo thought. It then occurred to him that he should try to meditate, to do some variation on what Harry had the students do when he taught the energy of love. At least I wouldn't think so much, and it might help me get through this nightmare, if I can do it. And it's a thought that hasn't been forbidden. Pleased with the idea, Hugo decided to try, but soon had a countering thought. I'll start when the screaming's over, he said to himself.

A slight groan of disappointment escaped Lucius Malfoy as the man screamed his last, and lay inert of the ground despite Malfoy's continued application of the Cruciatus Curse. Malfoy felt it was probably as much as he would get; after a wait, he tried again, but there was no response. He tried to Enervate the man, but again, nothing. He glanced at his timepiece; it had been one hour and fifteen minutes since he had started. He had given the man one-minute breaks every ten minutes to lengthen the experience as much as possible, and his master had told him to take no

longer than an hour and a half. He was mildly disappointed, as some had lasted as long as two hours under similar conditions. Still, it had been glorious, and the best was yet to come.

He paused, relishing the anticipation of the moment. "Avada Kedavra," he said, and the green bolt flew from his wand, killing the defenseless man on the ground. He gasped in pleasure as the thrill of the kill combined with the energy, the power, that flowed to him through the ring on the ring finger of his right hand. A few seconds later, the ring disappeared from his finger; it was now with his master.

In his private office, Drake glanced down as the ring appeared on his finger. It had been particularly useful, he reflected, in helping to train Malfoy. The training involved in making someone an obedient slave involved both punishment and reward. Sometimes the reward involved Brenda, the young, attractive, shapely, dark-haired woman who Drake had made his first slave, shortly after he'd had his epiphany: Drake could have made her go with Malfoy willingly, but he instructed her to resist with all her strength, which was the only way Malfoy could find it pleasurable. But more often the reward was to wear the ring and be allowed to kill someone. Fostering Malfoy's dependence on the ring made training him that much easier, despite Malfoy's initial resistance. The ring, a very rare magical artifact, caused the wizard who killed while wearing it to experience a rush of power and euphoria, and to have his spell power temporarily enhanced, but the effect wore off after forty-eight hours. Malfoy wanted to kill again, but he knew Drake would not allow him to do so for at least two days, not wanting him to become addicted. But Drake had promised there would be more killing to be done soon, much more. Malfoy simply had to be careful; the more careful he was, the more often he would be allowed to kill. Malfoy would be very, very careful.

Harry told the latest Snape story to Ron, Neville, and Pansy during their next Sunday night dinner. "Charming as ever," was Neville's succinct comment. Neville had long since gotten over his fear of Snape, but came nowhere near liking him. Hermione sent Harry a reminder through their link that one couldn't fully appreciate the story unless one knew what had happened to Snape as a child, and only the two of them and Ginny knew; Harry quickly sent back his acknowledgement. Soon after they had been bonded by Fawkes and Flora, Harry had learned not to respond to Hermione's nonverbal comments with words or nods; he had done it a few times, and it annoyed Ginny, since it made it clear there was communication the others weren't privy to. Hermione explained that it was rude, like speaking in a foreign language in front of people who couldn't understand it. From then on, Harry was careful not to even make eye contact with Hermione when they communicated through their link.

"He's not usually quite that bad," said Hermione. "Once in a great while, he will actually laugh, or say something funny, or display something that looks like warmth. I got the impression that he just couldn't resist here. Harry made a minor faux pas, and Snape will always jump on that. Other teachers give Harry a hard time too, of course. Snape is just sharper about it."

She turned to Harry. "By the way, Mandy gave me a fireplace call yesterday. Their group is going to start a project studying how the energy of love affects Transfiguration, so naturally they want to spend some time with me on it. She also suggested—but not too strongly, since she knows it's a big deal—that especially as the Transfiguration teacher, that I might consider becoming an Animagus. A few of them have decided to do it, and they're going to study the process. They think it might take much less time to do than usual

because of the energy of love. That's one of the things they hope to find out."

"Are you going to do it?" asked Harry.

"Maybe. I'm seriously considering it. I think everyone's curious what animal they'd end up being, it's only the effort that stops them. But they do have a point, I am the Transfiguration teacher. It seems like I should do it."

"Maybe you'd be a Kneazle," suggested Ron humorously.

"Do you mean you think Hermione's not attractive, Ron?" asked Neville innocently. Ron gave Neville a 'very funny' look, and said nothing.

Hermione gave Neville a mildly accusing stare. "Do you mean you think that Kneazles aren't attractive?"

The others laughed, as Neville's joke had backfired on him. "No, you know I think Crookshanks is cute," protested Neville. "I just mean that Ron used to say he was ugly."

Hermione looked unconvinced. "Nice try, Neville," joked Pansy.

"And that was only because I thought he had eaten Scabbers," added Ron. "Now I wish he had. He nearly performed a great service for the wizarding world. Seriously, Hermione, what do you think you'll be?"

"Well, I couldn't be a Kneazle anyway, because you can't become an animal that has magical properties."

"Really?" said Ron, surprised. "I didn't know that. Why not?"

"Nobody knows. I suppose I should say, there are no recorded instances where someone became a magical animal. It hasn't been proven that it's impossible. But really, I have no idea what I'd be."

"Isn't there supposed to be some connection between your character and the animal you become?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, so you'd all better be careful what animal you suggest I'll be," said Hermione dryly.

"Hmmm... at first I thought 'cat,'" said Pansy, "because cats are smart or at least seem that way, and McGonagall is one. But cats are also a little standoffish, and you're not like that, so I'm not sure."

"Not all cats are standoffish," argued Hermione. "Some are friendly."

"Maybe you're somewhere between friendly and standoffish at first, until you get to know them," Harry suggested. "I think a cat works." Harry had long since learned not to tell white lies about Hermione, since she would sense it through their link if he did. He chuckled. "If Ginny did it, I get the impression of a lioness, you know, fiercely defending her young, like in those nature shows."

Ginny nodded. "That would be fine. If I didn't like someone, I could always rip them apart." The others laughed. "In that case, Mum would be one too," added Ron.

"What about you, Neville?" asked Harry.

Ron responded first. "Penguin." Harry burst out laughing, as did Ginny and Pansy.

In a combination of annoyance and confusion, Neville looked at Ron. "Why a penguin?"

Ron shrugged. "Just sounded right." Ron's small smile told Harry that Ron was pleased at having made the others laugh at Neville's expense; Harry had heard that Ron and Neville, their friendship deepening over the past few years together with the Aurors, spent more and more time engaging in friendly put-downs. Harry could see Hermione try not to say anything; he knew that Neville had asked her not to step in on his side in such situations when they were all together.

Neville decided to let it go. "It's hard to say, really. Nothing leaps to mind."

"Panda!" suggested Ginny. Neville raised his eyebrows.

"Panda is okay," agreed Hermione. "They're cute."

"Really rare, though," noted Harry. "I wonder if that matters."

"I don't see why it should," said Pansy. "So all right, everyone, what about Harry?"

"Eagle," suggested Neville.

"That would be cool," agreed Harry. "Anything that could fly, really."

"Actually, Harry, getting back to things a bit more serious," said Hermione, "they were thinking that you could do it too. The only difference would be that—well, there are two things they're wondering about, considering your abilities. One is that they think it's possible that you could just become an Animagus immediately, just by deciding you want to be. After all, you can do anything that can be done by magic, so who knows, this may be possible, if only for you. Secondly,

they think you might be able to choose your animal. They're hoping you'll be willing to give it a try."

Harry was intrigued. "I'd never thought about it that way before. Sure, why not. I'd be interested to see what happens. But what I'd rather do first is see if I can become one immediately, but at first not try to choose the animal. I want to see what fate would have given me."

Neville and Ron exchanged a look. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Ron.

Neville nodded. "Betting pool."

Hermione rolled her eyes; Ginny laughed. "I swear, you two," said an amused Pansy.

"It is perfect for that," agreed Harry, knowing the Aurors fairly well. "They love this sort of thing that's hard to predict. I bet everyone will join."

"Are you going to go with 'eagle,' Neville?" asked Ginny.

"Probably. It was my first thought, and the Aurors say to go with your instincts. Ron?"

"Me, too, but I don't want to tip my hand. I want to be the only one who guesses what I'm going to guess."

"Bet you haven't decided yet," teased Neville.

Ron gave Neville a superior look. "Harry, would you conjure up a piece of paper for me, and make it so that what I write will be invisible until you turn into an animal, then it'll become visible. Oh, and also a pen."

Chuckling, Harry did so. Ron wrote a word, then gave the paper to Hermione. "You can take that out and look at it after he's done it."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," said Hermione.

"Just a feeling."

After they finished eating, they called Dobby out to thank him for the food. As usual, Neville and Hermione Apparated to their home, while Harry and Ginny walked the short distance to the Burrow to pick up James. Ron and Pansy, who still lived at the Burrow, walked with them. Harry often didn't get as much exercise as he wanted to; he had built in exercise facilities at his home, but it was a matter of finding the time. As he had discovered at the Twin Towers last year, he could stop time if he chose; he'd considered stopping time for an hour to exercise, or a few hours to read a book, but it seemed wrong somehow, even though it hurt no one. He knew that he would continue to age if he did it, so if he 'stole' an extra hour a day for the rest of his life, he would be two years older than he should in a half-century, and as it was Ginny would probably outlive him. So, he felt it wouldn't be fair to her.

As they approached the Burrow, they saw a collie wandering around just outside the garden. "Whose is that?" asked Harry.

"We don't know, it's only shown up a few times," said Ron. "Mum thinks it's a stray, she's fed it a couple of times. You know what a soft touch she is."

They walked in the front door of the Burrow; in the living room, Arthur was playing with James, while Molly held Bill's baby girl, now six months old. "You just missed Charlie, he was here to pick up Andrew," said Molly. She was pleased to

have three grandchildren, knowing more would be on the way; the twins were still unattached, but all the other Weasley children were married, or soon would be.

"Oh, Harry," added Arthur, "before I forget, I wanted to tell you what happened at the office this week." He proceeded to tell the story about the American woman's blog, only stopping to explain to Ron and Pansy what a blog was. "So, we don't think it's anything to be truly concerned about, but I just wanted to let you know. Obviously, there's nothing you should do about it."

"I understand, thanks for telling me," said Harry, as Arthur handed off James to Ginny. "How recent was this?"

"The entry in question was just under two months ago," said Arthur. "Entries since then are mostly about other topics. Oh, and Dudley asked me to tell you, you're invited over to your aunt and uncle's on Thursday night."

Well, I guess it's been the usual two or three months, thought Harry. He wasn't happy, but he didn't cringe like he used to. "Yeah, that's fine, I don't have any plans. You can tell Dudley tomorrow, he'll tell his parents."

"So, why don't they invite Ginny and James?" wondered Pansy.

"I'm just as happy that they don't, especially James," responded Harry. "The last thing I want James to be around is people who think wizards are strange, even if they aren't hostile like they used to be. They'll tolerate some small discussion of magic, but it's always easy to tell when it's getting to be too much for them. I'm not even sure why they have me over, to tell you the truth. I've been tempted to peek with Legilimency, but I restrain myself. Maybe it's because since I'm famous in our world and they're a part of

my 'story,' they want people to know they're not 'bad.' Just a guess, though."

"Well, it's good of you to do it, dear," said Molly encouragingly. "I know it's not easy." She walked into the kitchen.

"Harry, would you mind teleporting us back?" asked Ginny quietly. He nodded. "Okay, thanks, Arthur. Goodbye, Molly!" he shouted into the kitchen.

She ran out of the kitchen holding a plate of cookies, wanting to catch Harry before he teleported away, shouting, "Wait, not yet, not yet, I want to—"

To everyone's shock, James suddenly screamed, obviously terrified. A very startled Ginny held him up to her face as he screamed again. "James! What is it?"

Harry stepped over and looked into James' eyes as well. James stopped screaming, but was now whimpering, and started to cry. "Oh, sweetie," said Ginny sadly, holding him against her chest, his head over her shoulder. "It'll be all right, everything's okay." She continued speaking to him soothingly, and he soon stopped crying.

The others exchanged baffled looks. "What was that?" asked Molly, her eyes still wide with alarm.

Harry thought to ask James what had happened, but he didn't think that James' speaking skills were enough to give a useful answer. Ginny said, "Maybe you should do Legilimens on him, it'll tell us what was going on."

Harry was normally loath to do Legilimens on anyone, but he felt it could be important to know what had so frightened his son. He did, and reported to the others a few seconds later.

"He thought he was going to be killed," said Harry, very disturbed at the notion. "I have no idea why, and neither does he. It was just a feeling that came over him, really strongly. It was like how a normal person might react if they suddenly saw a sword being swung at their head and they couldn't move." He stepped behind Ginny and kissed James on the cheek a few times, then stroked his head reassuringly. "It's okay, nothing bad is going to happen, we're here. We won't let anything happen to you."

The others were still mystified; Ron in particular looked somewhat pale. "What could possibly have caused that?" wondered Molly. "Pansy? Do you have any idea?"

Pansy knew that Molly was asking for her expertise as a Healer. "I've never heard of anything like that, but I'm only one year out of training. I'll ask some of the senior people tomorrow. Unless you'd rather I did it now, I wouldn't mind at all," she added, to Harry and Ginny.

They exchanged a look. "If it happens again, then we'll consider it an emergency," suggested Harry. "For now, tomorrow is fine. We'll make sure one of us is with him until he goes to sleep. Ginny agreed, and they returned home, Molly having forgotten about the cookies she had wanted to send along for James.

The next day, at a quarter after six in the evening, Brenda walked into a Muggle pub, a few streets away from the Muggle London entrance to Diagon Alley. She sat in a booth, her back to the back of the person in the next booth. Without looking, surreptitiously pointing her wand at the person, she went through the usual routine. First a Confundus Curse, then Legilimens, finally the removal of the old Memory Charm and the placement of a new one. She got up and left, without having ordered anything. Her target

took another sip of the drink, unaware that anything untoward had happened.

She left the pub, found an isolated spot, and Apparated back to Drake's hideaway. She approached him; without a word, he cast Legilimens on her, retrieving her memories of the past half hour. He nodded. "Well done, Brenda. You may go." She turned and left.

So, Potter will become an Animagus, thought Drake. This may be exactly what I have been looking for. His disciplined mind started evaluating the possibilities.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 3: Harry visits 4 Privet Drive, where he finds out something that gives him cause for concern about what he did a year ago; Drake interferes more deeply in American Muggle affairs; Harry's attempt to become an Animagus leads to an important discovery.

From Chapter 3: "Professor Granger would no doubt give you a lecture on self-restraint, so it is fortunate for you that she is not the Potions master. What exactly was so enthralling that you forgot about your human responsibilities?"

Harry thought for a minute as Snape continued preparing the potion, and shrugged. "I don't think words can do it justice. You can have a look if you want."

Snape raised an eyebrow and touched his wand, spending a few minutes looking over Harry's memory of the previous night. As he did so, both eyebrows went high. "Fascinating," he said after he finished, and resumed making Harry's potion. "I cannot be sure, but I think certain nuances do not come through with Legilimency. Nevertheless, it is quite remarkable."

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Rogers got into his car, his workday having ended; he made the usual call, and got the usual response. His position more than merited a limousine and driver, but he had chosen to forego them. He said that it was because he was perfectly capable of driving himself, and wanted to save taxpayer money, but the real reason was that a driver would inhibit his pursuit of female companionship. He fumbled for his keys, and started to put one in the ignition.

Drake lifted the Disillusionment spell he'd put on himself, and spoke from his position in the seat directly behind Rogers. "No sudden movements, please, Mr. Secretary," he said calmly. "There is a submachine gun pointed at your back, one of the types which your political party thoughtfully keeps legal. I suggest you listen to what I have to say." He didn't actually have a machine gun, but he was sure Rogers would believe him.

Rogers managed to avoid sudden movements, but his heart was racing, despite the fact that he had faced death before, during his time in Vietnam. It had been a long time. Speaking quietly in an effort to stay calm, Rogers replied, "You'd never get away. There are security people all around here."

"I think I could, but let's set that aside for now. I fear you will have to keep Heather waiting, though not for too long. I know how you look forward to your... encounters. Speaking of which..." He reached into the front seat, offering a small group of photos which had been made from the images he'd

gotten in Heather's apartment. "I must say, it was very impressive for a man of your age."

"How did you get these?" croaked Rogers, wanting to sound aggressive but sounding fearful instead. Could Heather have double-crossed him?

"That's irrelevant," countered Drake. "What is relevant is that I also possess an audio-visual record of your conversation with your deputy last week, a conversation that if made available to the press, would do little for your professional standing. The pictures, of course, would do far worse damage. I am also aware of the abortion you had arranged for a rather young woman in a place and time where it was illegal, but I trust I have your attention in any case. Do I?"

Rogers sighed. This was very, very bad. "You do. What do you want?"

"For now, not much," replied Drake. "Simply that when you advise the President, your tone and words be more aggressive. For example, that if Iran were to start becoming more hostile, or more forward in its nuclear intentions, that a few dozen smart bombs delivered to whatever points the Defense Department sees fit would not be objectionable, and diplomatically defensible. Keep looking ahead, Mr. Secretary," Drake added, as Rogers had started to turn in disbelief.

"Who the hell do you work for? Defense? CIA? Or are you one of those Rapture types who don't care if things go to hell, and don't mind getting a head start on killing the heathen?"

"My motivations are also irrelevant; I strongly suggest that you do as I ask. I will not hesitate to distribute these. Please

believe that I will know whether or not you have done as I have asked. My resources are considerable."

"You shouldn't have even been able to get in here, this lot is guarded," agreed Rogers grudgingly. "Why not just take all this to the press? I'd have to resign, and the President would replace me with some hack who'd advise him just as you'd have me do, all on his own."

"True," conceded Drake. "But as your deputy pointed out, the words will mean more coming from you. You are a lonely voice of reason and moderation in this administration."

About to be extinguished, thought Rogers. Could this man really know what he said to the President alone? He supposed the President had friends he talked to, friends who this man could be connected to. Or maybe he has extremely advanced surveillance equipment; he must, if he has the information he already has. Goddamn unaccountable government agencies... "I suppose you'll have other requests for me in the future?"

"It depends on the flow of events. It seems likely. Now, please bow your head as far forward as you can, and close your eyes. I will be taking my leave of you now." Drake exited the car after Disillusioning himself again, then walked to a distance where the Disapparation sound would not be heard. Rogers lifted his head and looked around. This was a secure lot, so where had the bastard gone?

Harry got an impression, one of the kind he was so familiar with; it was from Hermione. We're ready for you anytime, she sent through their link.

He told the other teachers he would see them tomorrow, and accepted their last-minute words of encouragement. Hermione had told them what Harry would try to do, so he

had naturally endured a fair bit of good-natured teasing about what animal he would become. He teleported to the park in Hogsmeade, which had been chosen in case Harry became an animal that wanted some running space, or a bird, in which case he would want to fly. He was still hoping for a bird, but told himself to accept whatever came, and not try to force any particular animal.

Waiting for him were Hermione, Mandy, Padma, a few others from their department, and Belinda Thorpe, the head of the entire Magical Research Institute. He hadn't expected to see her there. As he greeted the Ministry people, he also noticed a dozen Hogsmeade citizens, including some children, notice and start to move closer. Didn't think I was going to have an audience for this, he thought.

Mandy spoke. "Thanks for coming, Harry. You know what we want you to do, right?"

He nodded. "Decide to become an animal, but not choose which one it is. I read a little about this last night. You sort of focus on your 'inner animal,' tell yourself you want that expressed outwardly, something like that?"

She shrugged lightly. "I know the book that says that. I'm not convinced that that's necessary, just do whatever seems natural for you. If it doesn't happen immediately, don't worry about it, just keep trying. We won't speak until we hear something from you."

"Okay. And also, don't look at me, okay?" He smiled to let them know he was joking, and got a few chuckles. "One more thing, Ginny wanted to be here when I tried this." He asked her in his hand if she was ready, then teleported her there. She kissed him on the cheek, and stepped back.

Harry moved to a spot where he was fifteen feet away from everyone, in case he became an enormous animal, such as an elephant. He closed his eyes, and focused his intentions. He mentally followed the instructions from the book he'd read. Whatever animal is within me, whatever animal I'm naturally in tune with, whatever animal reflects my essence, come out and show yourself, he said to himself.

In less than ten seconds, it started to happen. The change was disorienting, like traveling by Floo powder, but it lasted less than a second. It was done. As he moved his head to look down, he noticed that his neck was more flexible than it had been. He twisted it enough to see gold feathers, and he suddenly realized what he was. He looked ahead at the astonished assemblage, and he knew what he had to do. He flapped his wings, and took flight.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other, and each noticed that the other's mouth was open slightly, still in awe at what they had seen. As her eyes tracked Harry as he flew higher and higher, Hermione reached into her robes for the paper Ron had given her. She opened it, and in Ron's nearly illegible scrawl was written the word 'phoenix.' She showed it to Ginny and shook her head in further amazement; Ron wasn't usually given to such insight. She smiled as she thought about how happy he would be to win the Aurors' pool.

Misunderstanding Hermione's smile, Ginny asked, "What does he think of this? What's he feeling?"

Hermione reached out to Harry through the link, but found nothing. Surprised, she opened herself up to his feelings, which she was sure had to be very intense. After a few seconds, she answered Ginny. "The link's not there. It must be the case that I'm only linked with him in human form."

Ginny nodded. As she watched her husband soar through the air, her amazement subsided, and she now only had one thought: he could bond with me. That link I've always envied him and Hermione, I could have that with him, at least while he's a phoenix. I'd really love that, I hope so much that he does it.

She knew, however, that she could never ask him; he had to decide to do it on his own. It would hurt too much if she asked him and he said no. He would know that she wanted him to do it.

Harry had always greatly enjoyed flying on a broom, but that was nothing compared to this. He spread his wings wide, savoring the feeling. Now that he had wings, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

As he flew, though, he noticed something else. It was a feeling of happiness, well-being, euphoria, and it had nothing to do with the joy he took in flying. It dawned on him what this was: it was what phoenixes felt all the time, it was their natural emotional state. This is why phoenixes always radiate calm and peace, he realized.

He got a sudden impression: there is much more to it than that. He suddenly saw Fawkes and Flora gliding alongside him; the impression had come from Fawkes. Fawkes then sent another impression, which Harry interpreted as the words: welcome, brother.

They sat in a meeting room at the Ministry of Magic. There were the ten researchers in the energy-of-love study department, all of whom Harry knew, as he had taught them. Thorpe, the Department head, was there, as were Ginny and Hermione. Also, knowing that the Prophet would be doing an article on it, Harry had summoned Luna into attendance. He

knew that the Prophet would generally send a more experienced reporter for such a big story, but by calling in Luna to witness the meeting, he could ensure that she would be the one to write the story. He had learned a few things about manipulating the media since leaving Hogwarts. He absently wondered how Hugo was doing in his travels, as Hugo would normally cover the story.

He had set up a magical recorder, hovering in the air above them; it would record the meeting for anyone who wanted to see it later, so he wouldn't have to explain many times what had happened. "Okay, where to start... of course, I didn't try to do that, since Hermione had said that you couldn't—sorry, that it had never happened that someone's Animagus form was a magical animal. But I did do the bit from that book, about trying to meditate on your 'inner essence.'"

"Being a phoenix is your 'inner essence?'" asked Padma incredulously.

"Well, this is the interesting part," he responded. "I wouldn't have thought that myself. But I really think—and keep in mind that most of what I'll say is going to be... what's that word, where it's just from your point of view, but it can't be proved—"

"Subjective," supplied Hermione.

"Yes, thanks. Most of what I say will be subjective, or speculative. I really think that if I had become an Animagus at any point before Hermione and I went into the Ring, when I had that revelation that allowed me to do anything that could be done by magic, if it was before then, I wouldn't have been a phoenix. It was only because of that experience that I could become a phoenix."

"Is that because you could become anything you wanted, and you—maybe unconsciously—wanted to be a phoenix?" asked Mandy.

"Not like that, no," he responded. "It's a little hard to explain, but I'll do my best." He paused to think, then continued. "You all know what I said after the Ring, about the fact that knowing about the connection between magic and the spiritual realm was what allowed me to do what I can do with magic. You have to know that the spiritual realm is there, be really sure of it, have had contact with it. There may be other things necessary too, since I've tried to teach others and failed, even some mystics who contact the spiritual realm often.

"The knowledge that allowed me to do anything that could be done by magic was what allowed me to be a phoenix. What I discovered, while flying around, was that... phoenixes have a natural, built-in connection to the spiritual realm. It's one of their senses. When you're a phoenix, all you have to do is let yourself feel it. Fawkes helped me do it; he could sense that I was using only the standard five human senses, and he sent me impressions that helped me access that sense consciously. It was... words can't describe it." He glanced around the room, energized, trying to find a way to explain so they could understand. He shook his head, knowing it couldn't be done. "It was... beautiful, spectacular. I'm sorry, but there really aren't any words. I'll have to check a dictionary later, see if I can find some. It's just something you know is there, that you can feel, that you can't not feel. Albus described what it was like in the spiritual realm—he knew what it was like, even though he hadn't been there—and it was like that. Phoenixes are the only living things on Earth that are born with an easy, direct connection to the... power of creation, the intelligence behind everything, what

Muggles call God, what Albus called the spiritual realm. Phoenixes can just tap into it. And we never knew."

There was silence around the table, as everyone digested what Harry had said. Finally, Hermione spoke, quietly. "Why didn't they tell us this?"

Harry thought for a few seconds. "They did, in their own way. To you and I, to phoenix companions. They always send us their feelings; we just interpret them as calm, peace, and love. They get that from the spiritual realm, but it wouldn't occur to them to tell us in just that way. If we're getting the feelings, it shouldn't be necessary to explain where they came from."

"Wow..." marveled Hermione. "They're going to have to do an updated version of Reborn From the Ashes."

"You would think of that," chuckled Harry.

To Harry's surprise, Luna spoke up. "Harry, you could have a very long life now, couldn't you? That book title reminded me, phoenixes are reborn, so when you get old, you could just become a phoenix, and continue on until you had a burning day... right?"

Harry exchanged impressed looks with Hermione and Ginny. "I wouldn't assume that," Harry cautioned her. "Animagi live as long as humans do when in animal form, not how long that animal should live. Peter Pettigrew was a rat for thirteen years, but rats don't live that long. By that logic, I may not be able to have a burning day, whether I'm in phoenix form or not when I die. But, who knows, this whole thing is so new. We just can't say."

"That makes sense," agreed Hermione. "But Luna's question made me think of something else, another connection to the

spiritual realm. You learned from Albus about reincarnation, that we die and keep coming back. The way phoenixes die, and are reborn, is... symbolic of that."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "I hadn't thought of it, but it makes sense. It's almost like phoenixes are living representations of what the spiritual realm is like, so we could... get an idea of what it's like, maybe for them to help us along to reach it. I never would have found out what I did without Fawkes's help all along, I'm sure of that."

Thorpe asked a question. "Harry, Hermione told us that she couldn't feel your link while you were a phoenix. This brings up the question, could you bond with someone, as phoenixes do?"

"The thought occurred to me," he said, with only a glance at Ginny; he didn't want to air private matters in front of such a large group. "But I shouldn't, at least not yet. I don't know why, maybe it's one of those 'phoenix-intuition' things where they know what the right thing to do is, but not why. As a phoenix, there's no reason that couldn't happen to me, too. But I think I could if I felt like it was the right thing to do. And the link with Hermione wouldn't interfere with that, since that's only when I'm in human form. And my bond with Fawkes wasn't there either, when I was a phoenix. I communicated with him and Flora in the same way phoenixes usually do with each other."

"There's another connection to the spiritual realm, the phoenix-intuition thing," said Hermione excitedly. "Albus told you that intuition is listening to your greater self, the part that's spiritually connected. If phoenixes are connected to the spiritual realm, it would make sense that their intuition is that much greater."

"Some things certainly make more sense when you look at them like that," agreed Harry. "So, are there any more questions?"

There were, and the meeting lasted another half hour. After Harry teleported himself and Ginny away, he joked that Ron should take them out to dinner with the money he won in the Aurors' betting pool. Harry wondered aloud how Ron had guessed; Ginny joked that it was 'Weasley intuition.'

Harry smiled. "Let's go to the Burrow and get James. He'll love Daddy's new trick."

Hugo lay on his bed in the darkness. The rule was lights out at ten p.m. unless one was on a mission; Drake kept the same hours himself. Hugo wondered how long it would take for him to be able to lie down and fall asleep quickly, as he had when—Hugo ruthlessly, fearfully slammed the door shut on that line of thought. He preferred not to think specifically of the time when he had been free, at least not in those exact terms, as it led to thoughts of how that freedom might be regained. He could lament his state, but not contemplate any other.

He'd had any number of thoughts on variations of 'what have I done to deserve this,' though in the final analysis he understood that it had nothing to do with whether he deserved it or not. Sometimes bad things just happened to people, and they had to cope, or not cope. Bad things had happened to Drake, and he dealt with it by deciding to inflict his fate on as many people as possible in retribution. But Hugo remembered a story he had written ten years ago about a young woman who had suffered losses at the hands of fate similar to Drake's. She suffered through it, and ended up dealing with it by devoting what time she could to helping others who had suffered like her, and trying to help

prevent it from happening to others. It had made her feel useful, and that there was a purpose in her living while others around her had died. What was it about her that allowed her to find a greater purpose in adverse circumstances, while Drake had succumbed to darkness? Hugo supposed that was one of the great mysteries of life.

And what could he, Hugo, do? With no choice in actions, and limited choice even in thoughts? I suppose I could succumb too, he thought. Heaven knows I've indulged in more than my share of self-pity over the past two weeks, however long it's been. I'm more than entitled, but I could just continue down that road, give myself up to the darkness, take my anger out on the innocent, since I can't take it out on the one who caused it. Or I can hold my head up high, so to speak. Do what I must, even if not under the Imperius Curse, because there is no choice either way, but do it without self-loathing, just an awareness that one has no choice. Sleeping with Jolene that night in San Francisco would have been worse than what I did today, because I had a choice about that. I should hang on, stay as mentally healthy as possible, and continue to make the choices I think are right, even if the only choices I can make are the ones in my mind.

Dumbledore said that we should do what's difficult and right over what's easy and wrong; giving in to darkness would be easy. Keeping my chin up while every day being used as a tool to cause death and suffering, that will be hard. So that's what I should do. And if he decides to make me a slave, as he's said he might, then I won't resist pointlessly, but I won't give in to darkness as I'm pushed in that direction. There is always hope, no matter what, even if I can't contemplate the idea any more specifically than that. This is a little similar to what happened to Snape. He clung to the idea of love and happiness, though he couldn't experience them. I can't experience hope, but it exists as a concept. For now, that has to be enough.

Hugo then returned to focusing on love, as he'd decided to a few days ago. Drake had seen it in Hugo's mind, and hadn't cared; he didn't care what Hugo thought, except that which was forbidden, as long as he did what he was told. His thoughts drifted occasionally, and he had to pull them back. It took him another hour and a half to fall asleep.

As Hugo struggled with how to endure his living hell, thousands of miles away, Harry Potter had to cope with an overabundance of good fortune. He could spend time with his loving wife and his happy, playful child, or he could become a phoenix, fly anywhere he wanted, explore the world, and bask in the peace and love of the spiritual realm. However, Ginny had an idea, one he seldom if ever objected to.

As they lay together afterwards, she eyed him with a smile. "Now, when you're out there being a phoenix, you'd better stay away from the female phoenixes," she teased him. "That still counts."

He laughed. "I'm not sure I'd even know what to do."

"Probably if you got horny, you'd work it out," she joked. "And yes, I know, phoenixes only mate when they need an increase in the population."

"I know you know," he assured her. "And you know that I would never cheat on you, no matter what species I happened to be at the time."

"What more could I ask for in a husband," she bantered back. "I suppose you're going to want to go out for a fly before bed."

"Well, now that you mention it..."

"What a liar, you were going to do it anyway. You probably did this just to get me in a good mood, so I wouldn't object to your leaving."

He smiled. "The usual reason is that James needs a brother or sister, but it's not as though we ever need an excuse. But, fortunately, I know you're kidding."

"Just don't take too long, you do need your sleep," she advised him.

He stood to walk to the dresser, then suddenly stopped. "It's funny, I was going to get dressed, and then I realized there's no point. It feels strange to go outside naked, but phoenixes don't exactly need clothes."

"Okay, but let me admire you a bit before you go." With only a slight pause, she added, "And then I'll admire you as a phoenix, too."

He chuckled. "I am at your disposal."

"No, you mean you were just now. You're about to not be. Okay, go ahead and transform, but stay around for a minute. I do want to get a closer look at you than I got before."

"You mean, as a phoenix, or—" She rewarded him with a smile, and he transformed. He fluttered up from the floor onto the bed, landing on her stomach.

"Funny how your wings are mostly gold, but your body is mostly orange. Hardly any red on you." She petted him for a few seconds, then smiled again. "You're really pretty, both as a phoenix and a human. Go ahead, now. I won't wait up for you." She leaned forward and kissed the phoenix on the spot that most closely approximated his cheek. He flew upwards and disappeared.

Suddenly high in the air, he soared through the night sky. Flying was intoxicating, exhilarating. He wondered if it was the flying alone, or the connection with the spiritual realm combined with flying. Maybe he would never know, since he couldn't fly without being a phoenix.

After flying over England for a while—he didn't know how long it had been, and found himself not thinking in terms of time—he decided to visit other parts of the world. He teleported first to Hawaii, where it was around noon, clear, and warm. He spent some time flying around all four of the islands, being careful not to fly anywhere he could be seen by people. He found some nice beaches which were less crowded because they were harder to get to than others, and decided to suggest to the others that they come there some weekend soon to lie around in the sun. He wondered if James could make a sand castle, but decided it was probably too ambitious a task for a two-year-old, and that James would probably be happy to just play in sand.

Next, he decided to check out Antarctica. He marveled at the spectacular scenery, reflecting that there was something impressive about a vast, flat, snow-and-ice-covered landscape that wouldn't be so interesting if it were just regular land, though there were mountains as well. He noticed as he flew that he wasn't cold, despite the no doubt subfreezing temperature. He hadn't been overly warm in Hawaii either, so he assumed that phoenixes were relatively immune to temperature extremes.

He then decided to go to Asia, and flew over the Himalayas, admiring the natural beauty of the mountains. Again he felt blissful, the scenery combined with the link to the spiritual realm seeming to emphasize the point that the Earth was no more or less a living organism itself than the creatures that resided on it; he had never thought of it that way before, but

it just seemed to make sense. He felt bad thinking about all the factories and pollution and depletion of resources that kept the ecosystem going, and understood that it would have consequences if something didn't change soon; if the Earth was an organism, it was being wounded, and at some point self-protective mechanisms would activate to heal the wounds, or to fight off those inflicting them. He wondered if it would happen in his lifetime, and seemed to get an answer from the spiritual realm—was it really an answer, or intuition, or were they the same thing? It said that the future wasn't written, but the rate of degradation was accelerating, so the chances of an environmental catastrophe were continuing to increase. All actions have consequences. His first thought was that he should tell people, but he quickly realized that they already knew, but did far too little anyway. Dentus had explained long ago that in politics, wizards as well as Muggles tended to operate in their short-term self-interest until the reason not to do so was obvious and pressing, and by that time, it was often too late to take corrective measures. He also understood that there was little he could do; Muggles, not wizards, were causing the damage, and he wasn't supposed to interfere in the Muggle world.

Another phoenix was suddenly flying with him, ten feet to his left. Harry sent an impression of greeting. The phoenix returned the greeting, and sent an impression that wondered what Harry was up to; it knew, as apparently all phoenixes did now, that as of yesterday their number had increased by one. Harry sent his impression of wonder and awe at the beauty of the Earth; the phoenix returned the impression that it was pleasant to see through the eyes of a 'new' phoenix, who had not yet had time to become used to such things.

The phoenix asked if he had been to their gathering place. Harry responded that he had been there once, as a human. He was sent images of it, and an impression that told him where to go by teleportation.

Both disappeared, and reappeared in the air above a small island in the South Pacific. Harry followed the other phoenix down, through the trees and to the stream which he now associated with talking to Albus, even though he hadn't talked to Albus in that actual place, but a version they created. He landed on the ground, and noticed that there were about forty or fifty phoenixes around. Many sent him impressions of welcome; he sent that he was honored to be among them.

He spent the next while trading impressions. He expressed how excited he was to be able to experience what phoenixes did; they conveyed impressions about how they lived, and how they felt about companioning or not companioning humans. Harry asked why they companioned humans, since their lives were so pleasant without them. One replied that they did it for the challenge, and the experience. Another sent an analogy: spirits in the spiritual realm, Albus had explained to him, exist in an atmosphere of love, but live lives in physical planes in order to learn and experience; life in a perfect atmosphere is all well and good, but perfect became ordinary without something to contrast it with. Pain, loss, despair, and even evil had to be possible in order to appreciate goodness and love. It was similar with phoenixes: their ordinary atmosphere was idyllic, but some felt, perhaps too idyllic. Bonding with humans was their equivalent of spirits living lives in human bodies. Once bonded, phoenixes could/would not leave, as spirits did not leave their physical bodies until the body's death; while bonded, the phoenix could experience the full range of feelings, including

negative ones, which they could not independently, given their connection to the spiritual realm.

Harry never ceased to be amazed at the atmosphere in which the phoenixes existed: one of love, calm, and connectedness with creation. No wonder their presence and their song conveys calm, he sent. It is natural for us, replied one, but it pleases us that most wizards respond to us as they do. Speaking of songs, sent another, if you are interested, we would be happy to teach you to sing. It is partly natural, but there is an art to it as well. Harry eagerly sent that he would very much like that, and spent the next few hours lost in that experience.

It was ten minutes to eight as Hermione walked into the staff room of Hogwarts, just having finished eating breakfast at the teachers' table in the Great Hall. Sitting at a table, she looked into her left hand and spoke quietly. "Okay, sure. Tell her I will." She spoke to Sprout, as John, Snape, and Vector listened. "That was Neville. Ginny just popped by our place; apparently, Harry went out as a phoenix last night and never came back. She knows he's still a phoenix because she can't see him in her hand when he is. She thinks he must have lost track of time, and spent all night as a phoenix. She asked Neville to tell me, so I can send to Flora that she and Fawkes should find him and tell him to come back or he'll miss his classes." She focused on her connection with Flora, sending the message, and got an impression of acknowledgement.

"I can see why he'd lose track of time," mused Sprout. "That must be an extraordinary experience. In a way, it's too bad this didn't happen in the summer; he could have spent days at a time as a phoenix. Given how it makes him feel, he's going to want to do it a lot more than he'll be able to."

Hermione nodded. "I'm sure that's true. Flora just told me that some phoenixes have been helping him learn how to sing."

"Well, I hope he'll favor us with a song, when he's ready," said John humorously.

"Okay, he's on the way," said Hermione. "I really got the impression that he was reluctant to stop."

A few seconds later, a gold and orange phoenix appeared in Harry's usual spot on the sofa. "I don't suppose you're going to try to teach your fourth years as a phoenix," remarked an amused Sprout.

Harry transformed back into his human form, and was just starting to register the stunned expressions of the other teachers when he noticed that he wasn't wearing any clothes. "Aaaaaaa!!" he exclaimed, startled, and instantly conjured a black robe around himself.

The other five teachers present burst out in hysterical laughter. Harry could see the humor, but was still too embarrassed at what he had done to join in. Sprout tried to say something, but doubled over in laughter again; Snape was laughing much harder than Harry had ever seen him do. Snape and John in particular had clearly reached the point of laughing so hard it hurt, and were trying to control themselves.

After what Harry was sure had been a full minute, it had finally started to die down when McGonagall entered the room. She looked around in bewilderment, particularly at Snape, who was making supreme efforts to get himself under control. Lifting an eyebrow, she said, "May I ask what was so amusing?"

Hermione tried to answer, but didn't last long. "Harry was—" was all she could get out before starting to laugh again. She apologized through their link, but he knew she couldn't help it, and sent as much back. "I'd better tell it, Professor, since they'll just start laughing again if they try," said Harry, bracing himself for McGonagall's mirth at his expense. "I stayed out all last night as a phoenix, and I just transformed back to a human a few minutes ago. The only problem was, I forgot that I wasn't wearing any clothes when I became a phoenix last night."

McGonagall laughed, but not nearly as hard or long as the others. She sat on the sofa next to Harry. "I very much see the humor," she said sympathetically, "but as the only other Animagus here, I can see how it would happen." Adopting a confidential tone, she went on, "Once in my early twenties, shortly after I became an Animagus, my parents and two friends dropped in at my flat unexpectedly. I had been relaxing as a cat, and as the four of them stood in my living room chatting, I transformed back to a human, forgetting that I had been wearing only the... barest underclothes." She displayed a rare self-deprecating smile. "Fortunately, I was standing in a doorway at the time, and only my mother happened to be looking in my direction, so I was able to dart out of the way quickly, and no harm to my pride was done. Needless to say, however, I never again forgot to consider such a thing, and usually took care to be dressed adequately before transforming. It is a very understandable mistake." Harry was gratified, especially that she told a somewhat embarrassing story about herself to help ease his embarrassment.

"Understandable, but extraordinarily funny," amended John with a wide grin. "A lot of the humor was the sound he made, and his expression. It was one of those priceless expressions that you'll never see again."

Harry sighed. "I certainly hope not. Oh, wow, it's five minutes until class starts. I need to eat. I haven't had anything since last night."

"You don't have time, Harry," pointed out Hermione.

A place setting and utensils materialized in front of Harry, who had summoned it from where he knew it would be in the kitchen, waiting for him. "Yeah, I do, I'll just have to stop time while I eat. If anyone wants an extra fifteen minutes, I'll extend the field around you as well." He summoned from the kitchens a large cup of coffee, which after not sleeping, he figured he might be needing.

"You know, that's kind of a peculiar thing," remarked John. "Stopping time seems like a major, earth-shaking thing to do, and you do it like it was nothing, so you have time to eat your breakfast. It's like, I don't know, reversing the Earth's rotation a bit because you wanted to see a nice sunset again."

"Well, this doesn't affect anyone but me, or else I wouldn't do it," said Harry, though he knew John wasn't serious. The others decided to take the extra fifteen minutes, though Snape reminded them that it wasn't really fifteen extra minutes, that it would come off the other end of their lives. No one was unduly disturbed by the notion.

At five minutes to noon, just having finished his morning classes, Harry teleported to just outside the Potions dungeon so he would catch Snape before he left. He entered as the last students were leaving.

Looking up and seeing Harry, Snape tried unsuccessfully to stifle laughter. "All right, all right," said Harry, with annoyance that was mostly feigned. "How long are you going to be laughing about that?"

"I don't know," said Snape frankly. "It popped into my head during my last class, and I almost laughed again. What did you come to see me about?"

"I wondered if you could whip me up a quick Wakefulness potion," said Harry, looking mildly embarrassed. "I felt like I was going to take a nap on my feet a few times in my last class."

Snape chuckled, and jars of ingredients began flying off shelves and landing near Snape's cauldron. "Professor Granger would no doubt give you a lecture on self-restraint, so it is fortunate for you that she is not the Potions master. What exactly was so enthralling that you forgot about your human responsibilities?"

Harry thought for a minute as Snape continued preparing the potion, and shrugged. "I don't think words can do it justice. You can have a look if you want."

Snape raised an eyebrow and touched his wand, spending a few minutes looking over Harry's memory of the previous night. As he did so, both eyebrows went high. "Fascinating," he said after he finished, and resumed making Harry's potion. "I cannot be sure, but I think certain nuances do not come through with Legilimency. Nevertheless, it is quite remarkable."

Snape put the finishing touches on the potion, and offered it to Harry. "I have calibrated it so that it will start to wear off around mid-evening; I believe you will become quite tired at around nine p.m. Needless to say, I recommend that you resist the urge to transform tonight, and get plenty of sleep."

Harry nodded his understanding; Snape always gave a similar caution to anyone he made a Wakefulness potion for. The potion tasted sour, and as he drank the last of it, Harry

thought to make some comment about that, but Snape was well-known to be tired of people commenting that potions tasted bad, and usually had a snide comment at the ready. Instead, Harry did his best to act like he'd just had butterbeer. "Mmm-mm!" he said enthusiastically. "How do you get it to taste so good?" Snape's disdainful look was his only response.

"Right," said Harry, not bothered. "Well, thanks, I appreciate it. Were you heading to the Hall, or...?"

Harry helped Snape put the ingredients back, and Snape stopped Harry as he started out of the dungeon. "Harry," said Snape. Snape used Harry's given name occasionally, but not as a matter of course. Harry turned and gave Snape his attention.

"Of course, I saw your emotional atmosphere, as well as the events I witnessed; your feelings were the most important part by far of the whole experience. I know that you are extremely eager to return to phoenix form, and will likely do so at the first available opportunity. I cannot say I would not feel the same way if I were you. However, I would strongly caution you against overindulgence. Partly because the experience could prove irresistible, becoming something like an addiction. I could easily imagine someone in your position deciding to simply remain a phoenix, finding it greatly preferable to living as a human. You do, however, have many human responsibilities.

"I also mention this because of Ginny. She will be tolerant at first, and pleased for you. But if you do it excessively, she will feel that you are being neglectful, both of her and your son. I believe the most challenging aspect of this for you will be resisting the temptation that living as a phoenix offers. Granted, today was the first time, but you would for the first

time ever have missed your classes had Ginny and Professor Granger not intervened. That may illustrate the dangers fairly well."

Harry nodded. "Phoenixes don't really care about time, it doesn't have much relevance to them. I guess if I do this, I'm going to have to work out something to deal with that. Okay, thanks for the warning." As they headed out of the dungeon, Harry thought, I shouldn't do it tonight, and tomorrow I'm supposed to visit Dudley and his family. Maybe sometime Friday evening, definitely the weekend...

Rogers took his seat in the Oval Office opposite the President. On his left were Defense Secretary Richard Adams and Chief of Staff Jim Evans, and on his right, Tom Richardson, the National Security Advisor. It had long rankled Rogers that Adams participated in routine briefings on international affairs. Richardson's presence Rogers could accept, as their bailiwicks overlapped somewhat, but Rogers strongly felt that there was no reason for Adams to be there and, worse yet, interject his opinion. But that was the way the President wanted it; he felt that since the military's activities were connected in many ways with how foreign policy went, it was better for the Defense Secretary to have firsthand knowledge of the direction of foreign policy. Rogers wondered whether the President really believed that, or if it was just a way to give Defense a stronger voice in foreign policy.

"So, Tom, I gather Iran's been getting a bit frisky lately," began the President. "Want to give us the bullet points?"

Richardson's stodgy and formal speaking style contrasted sharply with the President's casual, direct manner. "Yes, Mr. President. First of all, despite our warnings, Iran continues to be very active in its covert activities in Iraq. They are

funneling money and other resources to Iraqi Shiites who share their goal of a fundamentalist state, and they are encouraging and infiltrating terrorist groups. We have recently captured a few Iranian agents working inside Iraq; one has already talked." Rogers wondered how much torture had been used; considering that these were prisoners whose existence had never been acknowledged, probably a lot, he thought. "He is confirming much of what we understood about Iran's strategy and tactics, such as—"

"I did say 'bullet points', Tom," interrupted the President with mild exasperation. "I'll read the details in your reports later." Rogers had long since learned to be concise with the President, whose attention span Rogers felt was 'challenged', but Richardson still had a difficult time.

"I apologize, Mr. President," said Richardson. "Secondly, the tone of the Ayatollah's statements is becoming even more belligerent, with the word 'sovereignty' being used more and more, and they've stepped up their propaganda campaigns extolling the virtues of military service. Their activities suggest that they anticipate, or are preparing for, an American invasion."

"Well, there's a hundred and fifty thousand American troops on their doorstep, it makes sense they'd be a little antsy," put in Rogers.

Richardson glanced at Rogers expressionlessly, as if to note that he was just giving facts, not soliciting opinions. "Lastly and most importantly, intelligence suggests that Iran is stepping up its nuclear activities. We have tracked some purchases of dual-use items that we believe are being used for their nuclear project. We also have several locations at which we believe nuclear weapons research is taking place. Our consensus is that Iran is working expeditiously to

develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent to a possible American invasion." Rogers wondered to what extent that 'consensus' was driven by the understanding of what the President wanted to hear.

"Bob? What do you think?" asked the President.

"It's pretty clear that they're scared, Mr. President," responded Rogers. "They know it wouldn't take long for us to pivot and head in their direction. They don't expect us to, as they know we'd pay an enormous price in the court of world opinion, but they don't put it past us, either. They regard us as a clear and present threat to their 'sovereignty,' and will continue to do so until we're out of Iraq. They could very well be attempting to cause us to believe they're developing nuclear weapons when they really aren't, for the deterrent effect."

"But that would have the opposite effect right now," pointed out Adams. "That was the whole reason we invaded Iraq, we thought they had WMDs. Why give us a reason?"

"They remember that we gave Iraq every chance to back down, for the sake of Barclay's political future and world opinion. The Brits wouldn't be along for this one, of course, but Iran would expect us to give them the same chances, and we would have to give negotiations a chance while we moved into position. They would always retain the option to back down and allow inspections, and we would have already taken enormous international heat for reaching that point. The anti-American protests, boycotts, and so forth would be twice as bad as they ever were before Iraq."

The President nodded. "And if it turns out they are going nuclear, how do you think we should handle it?"

Rogers remembered the mysterious man with pictures, but at the last minute decided to equivocate somewhat; he knew that what he would do wasn't exactly what the man had told him to do, but it was close enough that it probably wouldn't provoke a reaction. Maybe at most a warning to be more aggressive in the future. If he takes me down, thought Rogers, then it's bad, but I'll live. I have to push back a little, see what I can get away with. "I think we need to push the Europeans to negotiate with Iran on the nuclear issue. We don't even have an embassy there, of course, and Europe is big on negotiating, so we can tell them to put their money where their mouth is. They'll be the carrot, and we'll be the stick, or you can call it good cop-bad cop. We can put the onus on them to demonstrate that there are alternatives to invading, and we can decide that the time is up whenever we want."

"Oh, yes, the Europeans will persuade the Iranians to give up their nuclear ambitions," said Adams, in a gently mocking tone, which Rogers felt would be less gentle and more mocking if not for the President's presence. "They're quite well-known for their willingness to stand up to Arab regimes, and for their hardball negotiating tactics."

Rogers thought to point out that Iranians were Persians, not Arabs, but decided that the distinction would be lost on Adams, and the President as well. "I'm not saying I think they'll succeed," countered Rogers, with a 'do you think I'm an idiot?' tone. "I'm saying it's good for diplomatic reasons, we lose nothing by pushing the Europeans to do it, and we don't dignify the Iranians by negotiating with them ourselves. The Europeans can say no, but then they can't complain when we don't negotiate."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind," agreed the President. "But let the Europeans know privately that if they don't want to see

us bombing nuclear sites in Iran, they'd better show some initiative." Great, thought Rogers. They'll love that.

After the meeting ended, Rogers returned to his office, which he thought was otherwise empty. Invisible, Drake performed Legilimency on Rogers, then placed a Memory Charm on him. Rogers shook his head, wondering what he'd just been thinking about, and got back to work.

At mid-morning the next day, Rogers went into his office, just having returned from a meeting with the Kenyan ambassador. I don't know why we even bother pretending the African countries are important, he mused. We should farm out Africa policy to a temp agency, no one would notice. If we can ignore a couple of genocides, we can ignore anything on the continent. If they start making nuclear weapons, then I'm sure we'll notice them.

He sat at his desk, and quickly noticed a newspaper clipping with a note underneath. 'Georgetown Junior, 20, Found Dead In Apartment; Overdose Suspected,' read the headline. His mouth dropped open in astonishment and horror as he saw that the name in the picture caption was Judith Henderson, but he recognized the woman as Heather. He felt deeply saddened, furious, and anxious all at once. That son of a bitch, he thought. He scanned the article. 'A concerned friend stopped by her apartment after she failed to show up for an appointment or answer her cell phone...' 'An empty bottle of painkillers was found near the body...' '...foul play is not being ruled out, police said...' There were quotes from friends who agreed that she was the type who'd never kill herself, and that she had been as happy as ever until the day she died. He scanned the rest of the article, then with trepidation turned to the note underneath, which was handwritten. He read:

Did you not think I meant what I said? Did you think I went to all this trouble to be ignored? You decided to test me. Well, this is the result of the test. Before, if you had defied me, you would only have lost your job and perhaps your family. Now, your freedom is at stake as well. Before Heather died, she wrote in her own hand an anguished diary entry which implicates you, and is strongly suggestive of your involvement in her death. There is also DNA evidence linking you to her. The diary and other evidence can be made available to the police in a highly plausible manner at any time of my choosing, and it will if you violate my instructions in the smallest way. You are not indispensable to me. I also remind you that your family is not safe. Any attempt to warn them of any danger, resign your office, or relate your situation to anyone will cause exactly the result you wish to avoid. You will follow my previous instructions. You may follow the President's instructions regarding the Europeans, but you will no longer advocate negotiations; you will advocate a hard and uncompromising line. You will ask no questions and make no attempts to determine my origin or motives; I will know instantly if you do. You will do as I tell you, and in all other ways behave as though everything is perfectly normal. You will tell your deputy that your thinking on these matters has evolved. I am very serious. Do not test me again.

Rogers felt his heart beating faster, and he was sweating. Who could this possibly be, he asked himself frantically, who could he be working for? Why go to all this trouble? Never mind motive, who is even capable of this? His mind focused on those questions for a minute, with no result. He then looked at the picture in the article, and was ashamed to realize that he was far more preoccupied with the situation he was in than with her death. There was nothing he could do about that, however. And he had to face the facts: he was in a nice, airtight box. He was thoroughly compromised, and

so in a way was his country. He would do everything that was asked of him; the penalty for not doing so was too high. He could only hope that the consequences of his future actions would not be as bad as he feared.

Drake and Hugo were in the office, Disillusioned and noiseless. Hugo read Rogers' mood, and it was eerily similar to his own at many times in his captivity. Powerless, knowing that one is to be used as a tool, more concerned with one's own fate than with others'. Hugo was monitoring Rogers' mood for Drake, and would soon report that Rogers had now been brought to heel. Hugo was not under the Imperius Curse, but did not even consider trying to escape or warn Rogers. He did not have a wand, so he was not tempted to consider it.

Hugo tried not to think about how he had been used in this operation. He had used his ability on Judith to help Drake compose a diary entry that would be consistent with her character, after which Drake had put her under the Imperius Curse to force her to write it, then take the pills. Hugo had given Drake advice as to the phrasing of the letter, to maximize its impact on Rogers. Hugo told himself again that he had no choice, and he believed it. He asked himself what he would do if Drake told him to kill or torture someone, and he found that he didn't know. Would he just beat me down so far that I would eventually do it just to avoid the Cruciatus Curse? Hugo took some small solace in the knowledge that Drake would not force him to make the choice for no good reason, or for entertainment. Drake had other people for killing and torturing. Hugo was for information and planning. Hugo knew Drake felt that each tool should be used for its ideal purpose.

He and Drake watched Rogers rest his head in his hands. Hugo knew that Rogers would need some time to adjust to

his new circumstances. Rogers folded up the note and the article, and put them in his inner jacket pocket, intending to keep the letter as possible future evidence against... someone. One never knew what might happen.

Forty minutes later, Rogers reached into his jacket pocket to re-read the letter, but it was gone, as was the article.

At exactly five-thirty p.m.—he knew extremely well the value the Dursleys placed on punctuality—Harry rang the doorbell at Four Privet Drive. After a few seconds, Dudley opened the door. "Hi," said Dudley, gesturing Harry inside. "Just got here a few minutes ago myself." Dudley had had his own apartment for over a year, since he'd started working full-time. Harry was, in deference to the Dursleys, wearing Muggle clothes.

Vernon and Petunia greeted Harry politely, though not warmly, which he'd come to expect. Because he knew it was expected, Harry asked Vernon how the business was doing, and Vernon had gone on for five minutes before realizing that everyone was still standing. "Sit, sit," he said to Dudley and Harry, taking his usual recliner. "Would either of you like a drink?"

"I'll have some of that Scotch, I think," said Dudley.

"No, thanks," said Harry. "I already have too much temptation lately."

"What do you mean?" asked Vernon as Petunia poured drinks.

Harry explained about having become a phoenix, watchful for signs that the Dursleys were being made uncomfortable by too much talk about magic. Before he could finish the story, Vernon asked what it had to do with temptation, so

Harry tried to explain the connection to the spiritual realm, which he could tell Vernon and Petunia didn't quite believe. He thought of a way to put it in terms they could understand. "It's like... you remember that spell that only I can do, that makes people do what I tell them because they feel really good. It's a lot like that, like people said they feel when I do that."

Dudley surprised Harry by saying, "Say, I've wondered about that. Do that one on me."

Vernon and Petunia were now surprised, and looked disapproving. "Dudley, I'd really rather not," said Harry. "You know how I feel about this. I shouldn't use it for entertainment."

"It's not entertainment, it's demonstration," protested Dudley. "You say it's hard to resist being a phoenix, because it feels like this. I want to know what it feels like, so I can understand what it is you're trying to resist." Harry sighed in acquiescence; he wondered if Dudley was just taking a good opportunity to experience the Imperius Charm, which he'd heard so much about.

"Wait a minute," put in Vernon. "What are you going to have him do?"

"Nothing. I don't have to have him do anything for him to experience it."

"Well, I want to try that, too," said Dudley. "I want you to try to make me do something."

Harry frowned in confusion. "What?"

"I don't know," replied Dudley. "Just pick something you know I wouldn't want to do. Have me eat some food I hate,

put my shoes on the wrong feet, like that. And I'll try not to do it."

"Okay," agreed Harry. It took him a few seconds to decide what he wanted. "And let me apologize in advance, and remind you when you get annoyed at me that you did ask."

Harry cast the Charm, and Dudley's face took on the blissful appearance that Harry had seen many times before. Harry sent his instructions, and Dudley turned to Petunia. "Mum, I just wanted to say that I love you," said Dudley happily. Petunia smiled at first, then frowned at Harry; Vernon snickered and tried hard not to laugh.

To Harry's surprise, Petunia spoke to Dudley. "Dudley, are there any women you fancy right now?" Harry and Vernon chuckled; Dudley responded, "Sorry, Mum, I'm not answering that." Petunia glanced at Harry in surprise. "I have to be the one to ask him," explained Harry. "And I'm not going to ask him that. Dudley, how do you feel?"

"Amazing," responded Dudley. "Wonderful. Words can't really cover it. This is really what it feels like to be a phoenix?"

"I think so," said Harry. "Do you want me to stop it now?"

"No way, leave it going a while."

Harry smiled, then turned to a disturbed but fascinated Vernon and Petunia. "This has happened before. He'd have me leave that going for as long as I would do it. I could make him ask me to stop it, but if he has the choice, he won't. And it's not because he's under the spell that he doesn't want it stopped, it's just because it feels so good." He turned to Dudley. "Okay, Dudley, I'm sorry, but I'm going to stop that now."

He did, and Dudley's face registered his disappointment. "That was... unbelievable. It was like the opposite of the dementors. Everything was all right, and it felt like I would never be sad again. If that's really what it's like to be a phoenix, then I'm amazed you don't do it every chance you get."

"Like I said, it's very tempting," agreed Harry.

"So, let me get this straight," said Vernon, obviously inspired by curiosity to overcome his discomfort with magic. "You could make him, or anyone, do anything you wanted."

Harry nodded. "So long as it wasn't something I knew was morally wrong."

"Now, why is that?"

Harry had tried to explain this before, but he knew it was difficult for Vernon and Petunia. "Because the whole point of this is that it's based on love, that's where the energy comes from. That's why it feels so good. Something that you know is wrong is contradictory to love, and so won't work."

Vernon thought again. "As I understand it, you can create anything you want, and you can have anyone do anything you want. So long as it's not wrong, I know. But you try to avoid doing either, as much as possible. Why? Most people would do, create, all kinds of things. You could live like a king, and so forth... you see what I'm getting at. So why don't you do that?"

Harry could answer easily, but tried to find a way to put it that Vernon would understand. "You still play poker with your friends, right? Once a month, small stakes?"

Vernon nodded. "Yes, just for fun. As much to talk and drink as for the game."

"Suppose you weren't playing for money, or the money was so small it didn't matter. You'd still be interested in playing, because it's a test of skill, though there's a lot of luck involved. But now suppose that you had the ability to, before every hand, arrange the cards exactly as you wanted. You could do it just with a thought. Would you still be interested in playing?"

Vernon slowly nodded. "Okay, I see your point. Winning would be fun, but it would get boring fast. And there would be no challenge, it would be pointless."

"Exactly. As many of my friends have pointed out to me, it's very ironic that to have this power, it's necessary to understand that it really shouldn't be used. Even if I used it for the benefit of others, not for me, the more I did it, the more their lives would become like that poker game. For example, Uncle Vernon, I could make your business really boom, by causing people who would have chosen to do business with someone else to choose you instead. It wouldn't even hurt anyone—well, okay, maybe your competitors, who would have gotten the business instead of you. But even if it was totally new business, it wouldn't be that gratifying to you to get it. You'd want to earn it, not get it by me sending it to you."

Vernon grunted. "Well, maybe one or two nice contracts..."

Harry smiled. "I know you're not serious, but then after you got that, you might decide, why not one more, and pretty soon you'd have all the business. When you can have anything you want, it's sometimes hard to know when to stop."

"Like you, on nine-eleven," suggested Dudley.

Suddenly somber, Harry nodded. "I guess that's a good example, it was extremely hard. If it hadn't been for the risk of exposing the wizarding world, I would have saved them all. But that leads down a road I really don't want to go down. So I just try to limit it to what I can see in front of me, and not look for more. And not to watch the TV news."

There was silence for a minute, then Petunia asked, "And you're the only one who can do this?"

Harry nodded, then qualified it. "As far as I know. I hadn't really thought about that, I just assumed I was the only one. But now it occurs to me that if someone else could do it, they might not want to tell anyone. I had to tell people, because it was how I defeated Voldemort. But for the next few months after that, I had to spend a lot of time explaining why I couldn't or wouldn't do this or that, that people wanted me to do. What I just explained to you, it's hard to explain in the newspaper. By now, of course, most people—" He cut himself off as the doorbell rang.

Dudley quickly stood. "I'll get it." Harry finished his thought as Dudley walked to the door and opened it. In a few seconds, Dudley came back to the living room, a brown-haired woman in her late thirties behind him. Harry and the Dursleys stood as Dudley said to Vernon and Petunia, "She said she needs to talk to you..."

Dudley trailed off as the woman gasped. "Oh, my God," she breathed, looking directly at Harry, clearly stunned. "It's you... you really exist..."

Harry looked only a little more bewildered than the Dursleys. "How do you know him?" Vernon asked the woman.

Not taking her eyes off Harry, she answered, awe still in her voice. "He saved my life, last year. On September eleventh. I was in the ninety-second floor, about to die... and then suddenly, I wasn't. Is... is your name really Harry Potter?"

"Oh, man, this is not good," whispered Dudley, to himself. Then, to Harry, "Did you forget to do a Memory Charm?"

"I'm pretty sure I didn't," said Harry, now almost as stunned as the woman. "How did you..."

"It's a bit of a story, if you want to hear it," she said. Recovering somewhat, she approached Vernon and Petunia. "I'm Vicky Sheldon. You must be Vernon and Petunia, it's nice to meet you," she said, shaking their hands. "And Dudley," she added, looking at him.

Forgetting for the moment that it wasn't his home, Harry gestured her to a seat near him. "Please, sit down. I'd like to hear this story, if it's all right," he said, glancing at Vernon and Petunia, who offered mute consent, still very surprised.

She began by explaining how she came to think something very strange had happened to her that day, the result of the phone call that she was made to forget. "Very soon after that, I started to have dreams about what happened to the towers. People running around, in panic, that sort of thing. It sort of confirmed what George—my husband—told me about the phone call I couldn't remember, but it didn't help me understand what had happened. But one thing that I started remembering from the dreams was one face: yours. It kept coming up in my dreams, and soon I could see it as clear as day when I was awake, even though I had no idea where it came from or why I was seeing it." Harry was very anxious—could he have already blown wizarding secrecy?—but also mesmerized. Hermione asked through the link what was

happening; he realized that he had to be sending his feelings. He sent back an impression of being in the middle of something, that he would tell her later.

"This went on for some time, and it started to drive me a little crazy," Vicky continued. "Who was this man? Why did his face keep coming to my dreams? What did it have to do with nine-eleven? I didn't want to write it in my blog, because what I was writing was already crazy enough. I did tell a few friends, and none of them could help me, but one suggested I go for a hypnosis session. I thought it was a stupid idea, because of how you see it on old TV shows—you know, 'you are getting sleeeeeepy...'" She mimed holding a watch on a chain and swinging it back and forth. "But she'd had it, and swore it was helpful. So I agreed to try.

"It took a few sessions, but finally I was able to relax enough to recall what had happened. I recalled the phone call with George, I could smell the smoke, I was running and trying to find a way down... and then I was on a rooftop, looking you in the face. You said, 'you'll be okay,' and then I was on the street, which is where my normal memory resumed. But then, of course, I remembered the trip to Starbucks, which I now assume never happened.

"So, now I knew what had happened, but I still couldn't believe it. I thought, the hypnosis memory must be wrong, just my imagination. This one young man couldn't have done that, no one could do that. I started doing lots of internet searches, anything I could think of that had to do with what I'd seen. I stumbled on the idea of using the word 'magic' in searches—I'd already tried 'aliens,' so this wasn't much stupider than that—but there were way too many results to be helpful. I tried 'magic' and 'nine-eleven', but nothing useful.

"Then I remembered a detail from hypnosis: you had a scar on your forehead, it was pretty clear." She reached over to Harry, and moved his hair to reveal his scar. "Amazing. It just happened to be visible when I saw your face. I tried 'magic' and 'scar', and I got fewer results. Then I added 'lightning', and got a lot of matches that said 'Harry Potter.' I clicked on a biography, saw a picture, and it was the one I'd seen in my dreams. I almost had a heart attack, I couldn't believe it.

"I spent the whole next week reading. I quickly discovered that anything to do with you was presented as fiction, but it clearly wasn't, as difficult as that was to believe. I understood that there really was such a thing as magic, and a community of people who did it, but wanted to keep it a secret. I read about you, and discovered that you're a hero to that community..." She paused and smiled as Harry blushed. "Sorry, I know it said you're easily embarrassed. Guess that's true, too. But that is how you're regarded, you beat back this huge threat to your people, almost killed so many times... wow, it's true, everything in those pages is true..."

"Well, he's never been to other planets," clarified Dudley with a smile. Vernon and Petunia looked at him quizzically, as did Harry. Dudley quickly explained, telling his parents that he occasionally looked at the pages to see what Harry was up to.

"Yes, I assumed that was an allegory for nine-eleven, that they couldn't write about it directly," agreed Vicky. "A fairly good allegory, really. So, now I was convinced, but I wanted to get some evidence, just to confirm it to myself. Not to expose your world—who would believe me anyway?—but for my own peace of mind. Looking through the archives, I found an old page in which Dudley's real name was mentioned, and some internet searching helped me find the

real one, and then, you two." She gestured to Vernon and Petunia, still quite surprised. "So, I persuaded George to take us to England on our next vacation, which this is. Your address wasn't hard to find, especially since it's given in the wizarding web archives, just slightly changed. I wanted to visit, to ask you about it, since I knew I couldn't get into Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade; you were my only link. I was just incredibly lucky that you were here, I never expected that," she added to Harry. She looked around, entranced. "So, this is where you grew up... so, that's where you captured Draco Malfoy?" Then, to Dudley, "And you kicked him in the head?"

Harry and Dudley chuckled. "My proudest moment," joked Dudley.

"You remembered all that stuff you read pretty well, didn't you," remarked Harry. "So, now that you've confirmed what happened to you, what are you going to do?" He decided to use Legilimency to check the truthfulness of her answer.

She shrugged. "Nothing. I'm just happy to know, to finally know for sure what happened. I will tell George, but not the kids. Neither of us will tell anyone else; like I said, no one would believe us anyway. Are you worried about your world getting exposed?"

Harry nodded. "If you found us, someone else could. I'm just amazed you did. I'd heard that things suppressed by Memory Charms could come up in dreams, but I thought the dreams would be forgotten. I also had no idea that hypnosis could get past a Memory Charm. I have to talk to Hermione, see what she thinks."

"Oh, Hermione!" repeated Vicky excitedly. "She sounds so interesting, I'd love to meet her, and Ginny, and the rest..."

and see your Chocolate Frog card, and Diagon Alley... Yes, I know I can't. It all just sounds so intriguing."

"Not quite the word I'd use," muttered Vernon.

A timer went off in the kitchen. "Dinner will be ready in ten minutes," announced Petunia as she headed for the kitchen.

"I should go," said Vicky, standing. "I didn't mean to take up this much of your time, and I did come unannounced."

The men stood as well. "I may want to get in touch with you," said Harry. "I'll have to tell Arthur about this, and he may want to ask you some questions. Would that be okay?"

"Of course," she agreed. "How will you find me? Wait, of course you can find me, you can do anything you want."

"It's not quite like that," he explained. "I can't find anyone I want, just like that. I have to know roughly where they are, then I can do a remote search. But I can't just know where any particular person is, just by wanting to. That can't be done by magic. But here's what I'll do." He reached for her necklace, putting it into his palm for a second. "I've left a magical signature on this. If I need to find you, if you're wearing this, it'll lead me to you."

They walked to the front door, which Vernon opened. Vicky said goodbye to Vernon and Dudley, then looked at Harry, her expression earnest. "There's something I told myself I'd do if I ever found you." She leaned toward Harry and kissed him on the cheek, holding him by the shoulders. "Thank you for saving my life," she said, in a voice so quiet it was nearly a whisper. She held eye contact with him for a lingering second, then let go and left.

The three headed for the dining room. "Looks like you have another fan," said Dudley.

Immediately after leaving the Dursleys', Harry collected Ginny at his home, leaving James with Dobby, then went to the Burrow. He displayed the memory to all present (Ron and Pansy were out for dinner; he summoned Hermione through their link, since she had wanted to know what was happening) as an image in the air; he had learned how to do that so he wouldn't have to use the Pensieve so often. Arthur agreed that while it wasn't good, it wasn't dangerous in and of itself. There was still no proof of anything, but this was a real indication of a possible future danger.

Arthur felt that there should be a Prophet article about it, but that he shouldn't be involved in it, since he had been warning about the dangers of the internet for long enough that it might appear that he was using the incident to push his own agenda. It was agreed that Dudley would tell Luna about it the next day, after which Luna would interview Harry and write the article. Arthur warned Harry that he might face renewed criticism for his year-ago actions, but Harry didn't much care, and thought it was worth it if it illustrated the seriousness of the situation.

Luna ended up interviewing not only Harry but also Vicky, who cheerfully confirmed that the wizarding websites had been a big help to her quest, and that she never would have learned of the wizarding world or found Harry without them. Harry had another talk with her, emphasizing the importance of not communicating with anyone except her husband about the wizarding world, and put Forgetfulness Charms on both, to be on the safe side. He hadn't seriously considered giving her a Memory Charm, since (as was explained in Luna's article) she would simply do the same things she had done before, and upon discovering her

meeting with Harry covered by a Memory Charm, might document her experiences on the internet. It was better to try to get her voluntary cooperation, which she seemed willing to give.

Luna's article caused a minor uproar in the Ministry. Much attention was focused on Arthur, as it was his department's responsibility to prevent such incidents, but he obviously could not be blamed, as he had long been trying to focus Ministry attention on the problem. Bright authorized Arthur to use any measures he saw fit to stop the wizards who posted information about the magical world. Arthur then took the unusual step of visiting the ISPs of the wizards involved, and using magic covertly after hours to find the wizards' personal information. To his frustration, however, Arthur discovered that the wizards had anticipated such a move when their activities had been made technically illegal, and had already replaced the files, substituting false information. Arthur was able to get their accounts shut down, but was no nearer to discovering their identities.

Things got worse a few days later, when the wizards (Arthur believed there were only about fifteen or twenty of them) returned, now contributing information to the same websites, whose archives had been transferred to computers owned by Muggles. These Muggles had evidently befriended the renegade wizards, having become fans and followers of their 'fictional' world. Now that Muggles hosted the archives, there was little or nothing that could be done; aggressive efforts to shut them down by tracing them through their ISPs would be only temporarily successful at best, and would almost certainly arouse intense suspicion among those so pursued that perhaps this world they read about was not so fictional after all, as someone didn't want the information around, and if it was fiction, why would anyone care? Even provoking the wizards to go further underground and

working through Muggles was bound to be noticed by whatever Muggle community read the stories, and would itself arouse suspicion. They might think it was all part of the grand story—a story in which the storytellers themselves were being pursued by a repressive state—but it only added to whatever danger already existed. Arthur was deeply frustrated by what he considered the wizards' extremely irresponsible and dangerous behavior, especially in that they had reprinted the Prophet article about the Muggle woman finding Harry. Thank goodness Luna didn't use the woman's real name, thought Arthur.

In the form of a collie, Brenda trotted around the outskirts of the Burrow, keeping a discreet distance. Ever since Harry had become a phoenix, her nearly full-time responsibility had been surveillance of the Burrow. Her master wanted to know Molly's routine, and if possible, a way inside Potter's home, which was a hundred yards away. She was under orders not to go anywhere near it; Potter could if he chose recognize an Animagus in an instant, and if he happened to be in a paranoid mood, might check a stray dog near his home. If Brenda were captured, Drake would not be far behind. Her first priority was to be careful.

As soon as she had been conditioned to banish all thoughts except those to do with serving Drake, he'd had her undertake the study and practice necessary to become an Animagus. It was a good way to keep her occupied when he did not need her help, and she could be useful, depending on the animal. If she had become a deer or a sea lion, for example, it wouldn't be helpful at all. He'd been very pleased that she'd turned out to be a collie.

She'd made a couple of forays near the house, and had actually gone inside once, very quietly, under an Invisibility Cloak she held with her mouth. She'd learned nothing of

importance, however, except that the Burrow could be accessed. It would be difficult to move freely within it, however, even if no one was home, because the house-elf could show up anywhere, anytime.

Even though she didn't know whether anyone was watching, she decided to chase some garden gnomes. It was important to act like a dog at all times, so her master had said.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 4: Ginny is terrified that James could be harmed by a long-dead adversary; McGonagall is attacked by an old foe; Harry and Hermione discover a closely held Hogwarts secret.

From Chapter 4: "She spent over a year living in fear for my life, when Voldemort was trying to kill me every other day. She got through that all right."

"This is different. This is her child. She fears that he's been... infected, compromised, turned evil from the inside out."

4. Chapter 4

Chapter Four

It was a Sunday afternoon, and the time was four o'clock in the afternoon—in England, anyway. Harry had, as a phoenix, again scouted out that remote Hawaiian beach he'd had his eye on, and it was very helpful that at four p.m. in England, it was five a.m. in Hawaii. Harry teleported them onto an empty beach: himself, Ginny, James, Ron, Pansy, Neville, and Hermione. He had also teleported a small chest containing their supplies, such as suntan lotion and food, prepared by Dobby. Dobby had offered to bring them whatever food they wanted upon request, but they decided they would treat it as more of a picnic, and they could always heat the food magically if they wanted to. They conjured large towels and lay on them, one to each couple. They then took off their robes; the men wore only swimming trunks, and the women, bikinis. Sunburn was not a danger yet, but it would be in a few hours.

As Harry had planned, they were there in time to see the sunrise, which they all agreed was very nice. "Of course, you can see a sunrise whenever you want, now," pointed out Neville, to Harry. "It's always sunrise somewhere, you can just go there as a phoenix."

"Well, you can, too," responded Harry. "You can Apparate. It's just more convenient for me, since I can be in the air, and not have to worry about being seen. You'd have to research the Apparation points in the various countries. Or Flora or Red could take you, they'd be happy to."

Pansy and Hermione exchanged a glance. "I'm not sure we'd want to," said Hermione. "You know how that is, Harry. You

hesitate to ask them things like that."

Harry humorously raised his eyebrows. "Ah, but as a part-time phoenix, I now know better. If it would make you happy, that's all they need to know."

Ron looked at Harry. "Oh, yeah, I haven't asked lately. How's that going? The phoenixing?"

Hermione gave him an amused glance. "That's a verb now, is it?"

Ron frowned. "Now, the verb, is that the one that describes things, or..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "John would love this," she said to Harry. Then she paused, and added, "You don't know what it is either, do you."

He chuckled. "It's the action word. But I only know that from being around John for six years in the staff room."

"Wow, you've been a teacher for six years," marveled Neville. "Time sure flies..."

"It sure does. Anyway, Ron, the phoenixing is going fine. They're pretty much finished teaching me how to sing, or at least, they've taught me all they can. It's just a matter of time for me to get better."

"Want to do a little one for us?"

"Don't encourage him," said Ginny, a little more sharply than she meant to. "He'll have to turn into one, then after he sings he'll start flying, and we won't see him until we're ready to go home."

"I would not," he protested, feeling that she was exaggerating greatly, even though he understood why she was. Glancing around, he saw that it was no secret to his friends that though he felt he'd restrained himself well, Ginny was still unhappy with the amount of time he devoted to exploring being a phoenix. Contributing to the problem was that he tended to give her an estimate of how long he would be gone, only to exceed it a fair bit because being a phoenix was so enjoyable and he had no sense of time as a phoenix. "Maybe next Sunday at dinner," he suggested to Ron.

Ron nodded. "No worries, mate."

Neville chuckled. "Isn't that something they say in Australia?" asked Hermione.

"Jack spent three weeks there, just got back," said Neville. "He's been speaking with an Australian accent, and saying things like that, just for fun. He'll be pleased to know that he's influencing Ron."

"Well, he would if you told him, which you're not going to," put in Ron.

"Ah. Well, now I know."

"So, any Auror news?" asked Harry. "Other than Jack's vacation?"

"Not much," said Neville. "Kingsley's meeting with Jackson tomorrow." To Ginny's glance, he added, "Trevor Jackson, head of the American Aurors. Apparently there's been a series of disappearances in America, including some fairly prominent people. Kingsley thinks Jackson's going to ask about your availability."

"Kingsley should tell him he can have him, as long as he doesn't mind having him as a phoenix," said Ginny, in a tone that was not quite serious and not quite joking. Harry sighed to himself and gave Ginny an unhappy look; she came back with one that said, 'if you don't want me to say things like that, then stop giving me reasons to.'

The others decided to ignore Ginny's comment. "Is it really that bad that they'd need Harry?" asked Hermione.

Ron shrugged. "Not yet, I think. Kingsley's not sure that's what Jackson will ask, he just thinks maybe he will. They'd be reluctant to ask, because it makes it seem like their Aurors can't handle it themselves. But when people start disappearing, everyone gets pretty anxious, partly because it's not just random killings, but it's obviously being planned. They also haven't found any obvious link connecting the people who've gone missing, so they have nothing to go on."

"I don't know what they think I could do, then," said Harry, now unhappy because of what Ginny had said. "I hope they know that I can't just wave my hand and find whoever it is."

"I think Kingsley will let him know, if he doesn't already," said Neville. Harry's abilities had been thoroughly tested by the Aurors after he'd graduated from Hogwarts, so Kingsley would be able to tell Jackson exactly what Harry could and couldn't do—and equally importantly, what he would and wouldn't do, the latter category including such things as Legilimency searches. Other wizards could do them, of course, but Harry could be sure of breaking through anyone's Occlumency shields.

Harry now smiled as he watched James frolic in the sand. "He's not much for the sunrise, but he does like it here."

Ginny smiled as well, and leaned into Harry as he put an arm around her. He was still a little upset, as he was sure she was, but he never forgot that she was the woman he loved. We'll get past this phoenix thing, he thought. We've always gotten through stuff, whatever it is.

"He really is cute," chuckled Pansy. "Not just how he looks, but how he acts. Just like he enjoys life, like he likes discovering things. Just a little bundle of energy. By the way, how's it going with him and Dobby?"

One of the more difficult conversations Harry and Ginny had ever had with Dobby had happened not long before James was born. Harry had learned that in families that had house-elves, the house-elf was sometimes the new baby's primary caregiver. Harry, Ginny, and Molly were all determined that that would not be the case with James, as they didn't want James thinking of Dobby as a parental figure. Many old wizarding families dealt with that problem by making sure the child understood that the house-elf was nothing more than a servant, but that was of course unacceptable to Harry and Ginny as well. On the other hand, they knew that Dobby would love James and want to take care of him as much as possible, and that he might easily take their attitude as an indication that they didn't trust him to take care of James. They had eventually managed to get across to Dobby how they felt; Dobby had been disappointed, but had done his best to accept Harry and Ginny's repeated reassurances that it had nothing to do with him personally. They did allow Dobby to care for James sometimes, and Dobby delighted in the opportunity.

"It's okay. Every time we ask Dobby to take care of him for a while, Dobby acts like it's Christmas morning. As James starts talking more, we'll have to make it clear to Dobby that he's not to follow any instructions James might try to give

him, but he can agree to requests if he wants to. That sort of thing. He loves to play with James."

"We do too, of course," added Ginny. "When I'm not tired, that is. Sometimes I'm tired after a practice with the team, and keeping up with an energetic two-year-old isn't what I'm in the mood for. Thanks goodness for Mum. Harry, on the other hand, his job isn't physical at all, so when he gets home, he has plenty of energy to play."

As the sun started to climb into the sky, the women broke out the suntan lotion and made sure it was liberally applied, as none of the seven had skin that tanned especially well. Ron and Neville took turns playing with James, then they, Pansy, and Ginny went for a swim in the ocean. Harry kept an eye on them, as none were experienced ocean swimmers. At eight o'clock Hawaii time, they had their dinner, which Harry thought must have seemed strange to the few Muggles who'd made it out to the beach at an early hour. Most people didn't have such a big meal that early.

After dinner was eaten and cleaned up, all were full, so there wasn't much activity except for reading. James was full, too, but had enough energy to walk back and forth between the six, looking for attention. Ron played with him a little more, and Hermione used some seashells James had collected to try to teach him about numbers. Always the teacher, thought a bemused Harry. I wonder if her kids are going to take after her like that, if she has any. Probably not, and she'll be annoyed at them, telling them how much she studied when she was younger.

Harry half-noticed James make his way over to Pansy, then closed his eyes again. He tried to clear his mind, and found himself wondering when he would have a chance to be a phoenix again for a while. He felt that he shouldn't think

about it, because he'd just done it for a few hours that morning, but it was a thought that came easily to mind. He wondered whose point of view would seem more reasonable to an outsider, his or Ginny's, then found himself wondering what Hermione thought, as he sometimes did through the link.

He hadn't intended to ask, but had sent it anyway. She responded by sending an impression of, there's no way I'm going to get in the middle of this. You know how she feels, you just have to find a point you're both comfortable with. I don't want you having an attitude of, Hermione thinks I'm right, so I must be right.

You know that's not it, he sent with mild annoyance. Sometimes you want to know what someone else thinks, someone who has nothing at stake.

I know, but there's a part of you that wants me to tell you you're not being unreasonable. My outside view is that an outside person can't possibly give an opinion, only partly because your situation is unique. I can say that if you want her not to be unhappy, to demonstrate good faith you should just not do it again until she tells you she doesn't mind if you do. She'll know you want to do it and why you're not.

She'd also know that I got the idea from you, that I'd never think of it myself, he sent humorously.

Maybe, but I can live with that. The point is that she'd be the one in control, not feeling powerless like she is now.

He sent his reluctance. No one's ever been a phoenix before, there's so much I can learn, isn't it natural that I'd want to—

Their silent debate was interrupted by Pansy's gasp of shock, followed by James's startled yelp. Everyone looked in their direction, concerned. James now looked frightened, and ran to Ginny as if wanting her protection from something. "What happened?" asked Harry.

Pansy looked awed and afraid, seeming not to know how to say what she needed to say. "I was... playing with him, or kind of letting him play around me. He was touching my stomach, just messing around, I think looking at my belly button..." She paused and took a breath. "Then he started touching me, just with one finger, I wasn't looking at first, but it felt unusual, so I looked down to see what he was doing. He did the same thing again... he moved his finger like this." She put her finger at the bottom of her stomach and moved it up a few inches, then down and to the right, then up again.

"Oh, my God," said Harry softly. "That's where Malfoy cut you."

"The exact place, the exact way," she confirmed.

"But how? How did he know?" wondered Harry aloud.

"There's no scar, right?" He bent over to look more closely.

"No, Harry. There wasn't then, and there isn't now."

"Could there be some sort of... magical imprint?" asked Neville. "Fawkes cried on it, maybe there's something, that James somehow saw." James was now crying in Ginny's arms, Ginny trying to follow the conversation and soothe James at the same time.

"I don't think so," said Ron, looking ashen.

Hermione caught Ron's expression. "What are you thinking, Ron?"

Ron gulped. "Remember two weeks ago, when James suddenly started screaming for no reason?" The others nodded. "I think none of you noticed it, but the last words that were said before that were Mum's. She was shouting, 'not yet, not yet,' then he started screaming his head off. Those were... I told you at the time, maybe I remember it better because I was there. Those were the last words Draco Malfoy said before he died."

Ginny, Harry, Hermione, and Neville looked at each other in amazement. "What are you suggesting?" asked Neville. "That there's some sort of link between James and Malfoy? James is somehow tapping into events from our past?"

Ron looked desperately sad. "I would so love to be wrong... but to tell you the truth, I even had this thought two weeks ago."

It finally dawned on Harry what Ron was getting at. He was so astonished he could barely speak. "You mean... you think that he *is* Malfoy, that Malfoy was reincarnated as James?"

"It would make sense," said Ron. "He could be having... memories from a previous life, and things he hears and sees could be reminders. Seeing Pansy's stomach, hearing those words..."

Very emotional, still holding James, Ginny gave her brother a scornful glare. "You're out of your mind."

Ron started to respond, but was interrupted by Pansy. "I think... I think Ron may be right, though I hate to say it. There was something else, when he did that. When I looked down, he was looking up at me... and it wasn't an expression

I've ever seen on James. His eyes... he was looking at me like Malfoy did then, as if he was enjoying it. Not an innocent, two-year-old enjoyment, but a Malfoy kind." Pansy still looked shaken.

Ginny was even more agitated. "You're both insane," she whispered fiercely. "There is no way our son is Draco Malfoy."

"'Used to be', not 'is'," corrected Hermione.

Ginny whirled on Hermione. "What, now you believe this too?"

"Ginny, he's not being accused of anything—"

"Pansy," said Harry firmly. "Can I get the memory from you, with Legilimency? Hermione too?" Pansy nodded. Hermione raised her wand; Harry, of course, didn't need to. A few seconds later, Harry and Hermione exchanged looks of dread.

"What?" demanded Ginny. "What did you see?"

"I can make an image of it, so you, Ron, and Neville can see it," said Harry. He did so, and there was soon an image in the air of James, his finger moving along Pansy's stomach. He was looking at her face... Harry saw evil and malevolence in James's eyes, and it sickened him. In that instant, he was sure that Ron was right. Oh, my God, he thought, what has fate done to us...

Ginny now started to cry, and Hermione took James from her and held him. "It doesn't have to mean that," sobbed Ginny. "It could be something else... some weird kind of magical... I don't know, but something. Life can't be that cruel..."

Harry didn't know what to think, but he knew James was his son and he loved him, no matter what. He spoke to the group, but mainly Hermione. "Is there any way to find out? Albus talked about reincarnation, but only generally. What do we know about this sort of thing, how it works?"

Hermione shrugged. "I've read about it, but not that much —"

Pansy cut her off. "I may know more about it than Hermione. This sort of thing was discussed a little in my Healer training. It was mainly in the context of talking about how some medical conditions have their root in the events of past lives. Someone who has bad asthma might have died in a fire in the last life, someone who has back pain might have been stabbed in the back, that sort of thing. A few Healers, very few, specialize in hypnotic regression and deal with this kind of problem. It's only a few because this kind of thing is pretty rare, there's not much call for it. And James is so young, I'm not sure they could determine anything. But it would be worth a try."

"Where would we go?" asked Harry.

"I'm not sure exactly, but when she talked about it, Healer Haspberg said she knew of a few who did it, so I'm sure she could tell me."

"I want you to ask her," said Harry.

"Okay, when?"

"Now. The day at the beach is over. Find out where she is, ask her to get you in touch with whoever does this. You or she can use my name if it'll help." Harry used the phrase 'use my name' extremely rarely, but he couldn't stand to see Ginny suffer; he knew she wouldn't sleep until she found

out. He hated to incur favor-debts, but for this he would, if necessary.

Hermione handed James to Neville and started gathering their things. "Okay," said a slightly surprised Pansy, "if you'll send me to St. Mungo's, I'll find out where she is."

"First, I'll check to see if she's there," said Harry. "Which floor is her office on?"

"Ninth, the east end of the building."

Harry's remote eye quickly scanned the floor. "Great, she's there. I'll go with you. You guys wait here, we'll come straight back when we're done."

"Um, Harry," pointed out Pansy, "we're not wearing much in the way of clothes—"

Pansy was instantly wearing green Healer robes; Harry, crimson Auror robes. Both were wearing brown sandals. "Is this okay?"

She gave him a wry glance. "It'll do for now. But I haven't been dressed by anyone else since I was four."

"Sorry. I'm in kind of a hurry." Look after Ginny, Harry sent to Hermione, try to reassure her, make her feel better. She sent her acknowledgement, and he leaned over and kissed Ginny, who still looked despondent. "We'll be back soon." Harry and Pansy vanished.

Thirty minutes later, Harry, Ginny, James, and Pansy materialized in the outer office of a Brazilian Healer, a woman named Angela Vasquez. The secretary's eyebrows rose on seeing them; Harry assumed it was because there hadn't been the popping noise of an Apparation. Harry

activated his translation charm and approached her. "We need to see the Healer, it's kind of an emergency."

The woman nodded. "Your name, please?"

"Harry Potter."

Now, the woman's eyebrows went as high as they would go. Wow, I'm even famous in Brazil, he thought. "Just a moment, please."

After a five-minute wait, he and the others were ushered back to the Healer's office, and they exchanged introductions with the Healer. "I'm very pleased, and even more surprised, to meet you," she said humorously. She appeared in her early forties, with dark skin and black shoulder-length hair in a ponytail. "I assume you've come all this way because you need someone with my particular experience, and that it involves the young man here. And that Healer Parkinson is his usual healer."

"And a close family friend, yes, but she's also involved in the incident that brings us here," said Harry, who then launched into the story of what had happened on the beach, adding background details from their history with Malfoy as necessary. Vasquez listened, fascinated. James was silent, with an expression that suggested that he feared he'd done something very wrong.

"All right, I think I know what I need to know, for now," said Vasquez. "Mrs. Potter, I should tell you first that even if it is what you fear, it's not as bad as I think you believe it is. How familiar are you with reincarnation?"

Harry answered. "We know the basics of it, really. That it's how spirits get a variety of experiences and circumstances

as they learn about... life, themselves, whatever. That's about what we know."

"Well, I'll tell you more details, which should be helpful to understand. First of all, if it is in fact Draco Malfoy's spirit that is now your son's spirit, it does not mean that he is somehow evil, or less worthwhile, or any different from anyone else. Spirits are not evil in and of themselves; the people who they inhabit may commit evil deeds, but those are very different things. Spirits are fundamentally based in the energy of creation, which is love. What makes us good or evil are the choices we make in any given lifetime; our circumstances influence our choices, but do not control them. Draco Malfoy was evil because he was raised to be evil, not because he had an evil spirit. Some people become evil due to horrific events in their lives, and a few do for no discernible reason. Even for them, it had nothing to do with their spirit per se."

"So, our spirits aren't responsible for what we do?" asked a slightly confused Pansy. "They have no influence?"

"Yes, this can get tricky," agreed the Healer. "There is a distinction between 'you' and 'your spirit.' 'You' are your conscious self, your ego, in a sense. 'Your spirit' is... a greater entity, if you will; 'you' are a part of it, the part that operates in the physical world. Your 'spirit' does not make decisions; your conscious self does that. It can help you, through what we call intuition. Your spirit absorbs your experience, and your past identity after you die. All spirits are different because they have different experiences, yet fundamentally the same. All humans are different, yet fundamentally the same. Consider an analogy based on the idea of you, and your experiences. You are not your experiences, but they shape who you are. Your various lives are in a sense experiences for your spirit. Their identities are

absorbed into your spirit, but they generally do not affect your current life. If they did, it would defeat the purpose of reincarnation, and we might just as well live one very long life. One life has little to do with the previous one, except to add to the spirit's experience. For example, Mr. Potter—"

"Harry."

"Harry, you've discovered a new form of magical energy that could revolutionize the wizarding world. You've defeated evil, and are obviously a good man and a loving parent. I ask you, were you a mass murderer in the life before this one?"

Harry's eyebrows went up. After a pause, he answered, "I don't know."

She nodded. "I don't know either, but I will stand here and tell you that it is entirely possible. And if you were, it would have nothing to do with your current life, except that it was experience for your spirit."

"So, am I nothing more than experience for my spirit? After I die, what will happen to whatever it is that makes me me?"

"You mean, what will happen to your conscious self, which you identify as 'you'. It will not die, but it is only part of you, the 'real' you, which is your spirit. Your conscious self will remain a part of your overall self, or 'spirit', and after you die, it will no longer operate as a conscious self in this plane, though it may do so in the spiritual plane if it chooses. This is where things start to get difficult. You—your conscious self—are both an independent entity, in a sense, and a part of a whole. But we are getting further and further away from the current situation.

"If your son's spirit's experience includes having lived the life of Draco Malfoy, the only way it will affect the life of

James Potter is in situations like this, in which memory from one life creeps into another. You need not worry about your son being like Draco Malfoy; there is no greater a chance that he will than anyone else."

"What about that look in his eyes?" asked Pansy. "Is that something that could somehow creep into his character? It was almost as though Malfoy had taken over or something." She glanced at Ginny, who winced, and Harry could tell that Pansy regretted having asked the question.

Vasquez shook her head. "It was just part of the memory. If James' spirit used to be Malfoy's, James has access to Draco Malfoy's memories, as we all do of our past lives at an unconscious level. James is so young that his... 'thinking,' or reasoning process, isn't fully formed, so it was more natural for him to experience the memory by acting it out than by just remembering it. That sort of thing is very rare, and probably won't happen again."

"How did—" started Harry, but was interrupted by an impatient Ginny. "Can we just do this, and have the rest of this conversation afterwards? I'd really like to find out."

Harry shrugged lightly, an unspoken apology to Vasquez for Ginny's brusqueness. "How does this work?"

"I'm not even certain that it will work," warned the Healer. "It's very unusual to try it on someone so young. I'll give him a potion, perfectly harmless, to assist him in getting to the state we need him to be in. He needs to relax enough for this to work." She reached across her desk and handed James a piece of chocolate, which he eagerly accepted. "It has a very mild sedative in it," she explained.

"Enough to compensate for how hyper the chocolate will make him?" asked Ginny.

"A little more than that, yes," said Vasquez humorously. "The potion is one that will encourage his unconscious to surface. When I do this with adults, it's usually not necessary to use the potion, and I find that recall is clearer without the potion. I use it for adults who have a difficult time reaching the necessary state. In this case, I have no choice, since he's too young to follow instructions on how to get there. I'll do what I can, but we'll just have to wait and see."

"After you give him the potion, what happens then?" asked Pansy.

"Normally, I would guide the patient to a state of mind from which past-life memories can be accessed, then ask questions. In this case, I'll do my best, but he won't be able to answer questions, as he's too young. Normally, this would be useless. But I understand that you, Harry, are a Legilimens. You'll need to access his recent memories; that's the only way we can know." Vasquez helped James up onto a reclining chair, and had him drink the potion.

"Would it help if I did the Imperius Charm on him?" asked Harry. "Told him to recall memories of his most recent life?"

"I don't know, I've never had the opportunity to use that before. Let's keep that in reserve for now, though." She turned to James and spoke soothingly, bidding him to relax. For ten minutes, however, he refused to relax, his eyes darting all around. He tried to get up twice. Finally, Vasquez turned to Harry. "This is why I don't usually try this on such young people. It's important to try, and be able, to relax. I'm about ready to have you use your spell, because this isn't going to work otherwise. But for now, don't use it to get him to recall anything, just have him relax, to not move or think. Just relax completely."

Harry cast the Imperius Charm on his son, who brightened, then started to relax. He was soon in just the state Vasquez wanted him in. "James, I want you to remember when you were big. Now you're James, but before that, you were someone else. Let memories come to you." She turned to Harry. "Can you reduce the intensity of that spell?"

"No. It's all or nothing."

"James," said Vasquez softly. "Can you remember?"

"I'm hurting Mummy..." Harry, Ginny, and Pansy exchanged startled looks.

"Shut it off. I'm concerned about something," instructed Vasquez.

"What is—"

"Shut it off, *now!*"

Alarmed, Harry did so. James suddenly screamed, then started wailing and crying. "I hurt Mummy, I hurt Mummy..."

"Do Legilimency on him quickly, see what he saw." Harry quickly did. "Are you finished?" He nodded. She waved her wand, and James went silent, a blank look on his face. "I gave him a Memory Charm, to mitigate the damage."

"What damage?" asked a very emotional Ginny. To Harry, she asked, "What did you see? What did he see?"

Harry took a deep breath. "He saw Malfoy torturing you in the Chamber of Secrets. It is him, his spirit, whatever you want to call it."

"I don't believe it..." Ginny mumbled in despair, bowing her head. Harry put an arm around her. "It'll be all right," he assured her. To Vasquez, "You said, mitigate the damage. What damage?"

The Healer was upset at herself. "Nothing serious, and it's likely that there's no damage at all. I didn't expect that to happen. He's fine now, he'll be recovering from the Memory Charm in a minute. But it's better if he's not here when we talk about this. We should send him outside."

Harry focused his remote eye on his home, where Hermione, Neville, and Ron were waiting. He sent James there with a thought, mentally asking Hermione to look after him carefully and make sure he was occupied. She sent that they would. "He's at home, being looked after," Harry reported to Vasquez.

"That must be convenient," she remarked. To Harry and Ginny, she said, "As I said, I'm almost certain he'll suffer no ill effects because of my mistake."

"What mistake?" asked Harry and Ginny in unison.

"This is a very unusual case," the Healer explained. "He's very young, his most recent life was filled with hatred and violence, and I allowed myself to be influenced by your strong desire to know whether or not it was true. I did not use my best professional judgment. I should have told you that it was not in his best interest to have this done, that he was too young, and finding out would have to wait until he was older, or became more symptomatic. I also should not have had you use the Imperius Charm; as Healer Parkinson no doubt knows, one should never use a treatment or instrument which one does not know well."

"I should explain that the fact that he recently experienced associations from a past life is not so uncommon, especially for his age. Children from ages two to five sometimes experience flashes of such memory, and in rare instances, much more than a flash. Instances have been recorded of very young children speaking languages they had never been exposed to, walking around foreign neighborhoods with the knowledge of a native, that sort of thing. It is common at this age because children's minds are very open; the child's 'ego structure' is not yet fully formed, and no one has discouraged them from taking this sort of information seriously, as many parents do.

"The danger was in the fact that I believe he is not ready for the information he saw, which was the reason for my belated Memory Charm. Instant associations with outside stimuli, such as a particular phrase or Healer Parkinson's stomach, are one thing; viewing an image of deliberate torture is very much another. He's not old enough to understand what it means. When he saw that, he thought that *he* had done that to you. 'I hurt Mummy.' The only reason he didn't cry out in alarm as soon as he saw that was that the Imperius Charm was being used, and the euphoria it causes repressed that reaction. Given more time, he could have recalled any number of horrific images and memories, and we wouldn't have known until the Charm was removed, by which time serious damage could have been done, Memory Charms notwithstanding. People normally, in regression, do not see what they cannot handle seeing; it's as if the spirit is supervising. The Imperius Charm overrode his self-preservation instinct, and caused him to recall images he could not process correctly. I am very sorry about that."

"It was my idea to use it," said Harry ruefully.

"I'm the Healer, and responsible for the treatment," she countered. "It's my job to know what negative effects were possible."

"If he does suffer any damage from this, what would it be?" asked Pansy. "How would it manifest?"

"Nightmares, probably. People do dream of events covered by Memory Charms; though they do not usually recall the dreams, there are exceptions. It should not be an issue in his day-to-day life, even in the worst case. He could—again, this is the worst case—suffer anxiety, and other such symptoms of having been through a traumatic experience, though this was quite brief and soon covered."

"Why should there be any damage, if he won't remember it?" asked Harry.

Pansy answered before Vasquez could. "Trauma can cause psychological damage that covering the memory won't erase. For example, your first serious trauma was when you saw Cedric killed, then Voldemort come back. If Dumbledore had given you a Memory Charm to make you forget what happened, you still would have felt unsettled, still would have had nightmares. In fact, it would have been worse, since you wouldn't have known why you were having those reactions. Early in Healer training, they teach you that you can't make trauma go away with Memory Charms, and you shouldn't try. It would erase the anxiety caused by the conscious memory, but the deeper damage would still be there. I think Healer Vasquez is saying that we can't know exactly what if any trauma was inflicted on James by seeing that memory. But I agree with her that it should be minimal, if there is any at all. It wasn't for long, and kids are resilient. If there is any damage, it should come out when he interacts with you, Ginny."

Ginny was following the conversation, but her mind was reeling. Draco Malfoy! She was appalled that part of whatever had been Malfoy was now her son. It was too much to accept; she desperately wanted it not to be true. She tried to banish the thoughts and focus. "Why me?"

"Because the memory he saw concerned you," explained Vasquez. "He may behave hesitantly or afraid around you at times, not knowing why. If you love him unreservedly and demonstrate that nothing is wrong, any such damage will likely soon pass. If you behave the same way with him—treat him as if he were Draco Malfoy—the problem, if there is one, could become worse. The best thing you can do is be your usual self."

Ginny slowly nodded. Harry looked at her, concerned. He could see her emotions in her eyes. He kissed her forehead. "He's still our son."

"This doesn't bother you?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm not happy. I wish it hadn't happened, and I'm concerned for James. But he's James, not Malfoy. You heard what they said. It's not as though he's going to be evil. You heard Healer Vasquez say that I could have been a mass murderer in my last life. Would knowing that change how you felt about me?"

"Of course not," she said with annoyance and pain. "This just... feels different. It's bound to, considering my experience with Malfoy." To Harry and Pansy, she said, "Mum has to know about this, so we'll tell her and Dad. But apart from them, and the six of us, no one's going to know about this."

"Of course," agreed Pansy. Harry nodded. They talked for another few minutes, and said their goodbyes to Healer

Vasquez. As they started to leave the office, Ginny turned to Vasquez. "You have experience with this kind of thing. Do you have any idea why this happened? There are millions of families he could have been born into. Why us? Did fate decide that we were too happy and comfortable and give us another problem, as if we hadn't already been through enough for a few lifetimes? Why?"

"I don't know," responded Vasquez; Harry got the immediate sense that she was lying, or holding back. Not from Legilimency, but from experience associated with it. "I can tell you," she continued, "that spirits choose their next incarnation. He chose you, for whatever reason."

"Because he was an evil bastard and wanted us to suffer?" lamented Ginny.

"His spirit chose you, not his earthly personality," emphasized Vasquez. "His spirit, as I have said, is not evil. The reasons he chose you would have to do with his soul's progress and education, not to make you suffer as an objective."

"Healer, this business about choosing made me remember something. The last time I spoke to Draco Malfoy was a time when we both knew he was going to be executed. The last words he ever spoke to me were, 'You'll see me again, Potter, but you won't know it's me until it's too late.'" Ginny blanched at the memory. "I assumed at the time that it was an empty threat, based on the idea of using Polyjuice Potion. Is there any way, some obscure magic, that he could have actually decided this at that time? Kept more of his personality than usual, used James as a bridge to come back and hurt us somehow?" Ginny looked terrified at the very notion.

"Absolutely not," said Vasquez firmly. "Magic cannot influence such things, and people like him didn't believe in an afterlife anyway, so they would never have even considered such a thing. It is as I told you: that boy is James Potter, nothing more. His spirit's past lives are utterly irrelevant, except insofar as the memory of them could cause difficulties. The sooner both of you accept that, the better off James will be. Love him as you always have, and it will be all right."

"I can do that," agreed Harry, who did not consciously register that Ginny didn't make the same affirmation. "Thank you, Healer."

They turned to leave, Harry behind Pansy and Ginny. When Pansy and Ginny turned their heads and were no longer looking in his direction, Harry stopped time in the area surrounding only him and Vasquez, and turned back to the very surprised Healer. "You weren't quite telling the truth before," he said, in a neutral tone. "You do know why he chose us."

She raised her eyebrows. "Legilimency?"

"Just a feeling."

"Based on my experience, and your situation, I have a strong suspicion," she admitted. "But I could be wrong, and in any case it's not for me to say. I will only say, with confidence, that it is not to hurt or terrorize you. By the way, it was a very poor idea to ask that last question in front of your wife. She's clearly having a very hard time with this, and doesn't need more negative ideas to dwell on. She needs to be given very positive reinforcement."

Harry felt mildly offended on Ginny's behalf. "She's an adult," he protested. "She's been through a lot of stuff, she

doesn't need to be shielded or protected—"

"Yes, she has been through a lot, and that's why you have to consider her mental state carefully," Vasquez countered.

"I'm not saying she's not strong, but we all react in different ways to different things. I'm simply saying that you should focus on the positive. When we fear something, it's easy to latch onto ideas that reinforce your fear."

"She spent over a year living in fear for my life, when Voldemort was trying to kill me every other day. She got through that all right."

"This is different. This is her child. She fears that he's been... infected, compromised, turned evil from the inside out. As a Healer, I'm confident that that's not the case. As a mother, I don't know that I wouldn't feel the same way she does. It's a terrifying thought. She needs your support."

"She'll get it," said Harry confidently. "And, thank you again."

Vasquez nodded. Harry turned around, and started time again.

Later that night, Harry and Ginny were sitting on the sofa in their spacious living room. They had just finished putting James to bed; to Harry's relief, he had shown no ill effects from what had happened earlier. Some day at the beach that was, thought Harry.

He moved closer to her, pulling her head to rest against his shoulder. "How're you doing?"

She sighed. "When this happened, I felt like I was going to be sick. I still feel that way a little. I just can't stop thinking

that somehow he did plan it. I mean, what he said to you that day, it just fits so perfectly..."

"She said it's impossible."

"What if she's wrong? She said she made a mistake because she didn't think about how the Imperius Charm worked, maybe she's made a mistake about this too."

"I don't think so," he argued. "What she said really sounds right. I really think magic can't affect the spiritual realm, things just don't work the same way. And he didn't believe in an afterlife. I really think it's inconceivable. Just because she made one mistake doesn't mean any particular thing she says is wrong."

"Maybe," she conceded. "I don't know, I'm just scared."

He squeezed her. "It'll be all right. This will pass."

She gave him a 'what are you talking about?' glance. "Draco Malfoy was reincarnated as our son. That will never pass, we're stuck with it."

"I meant that I don't think he'll suffer for it," clarified Harry. "We just have to remember that he's a totally separate person from Malfoy. He's happy, he's active, he responds well to love... not very Malfoy-ish, it seems to me."

She nodded, but said nothing. After a moment, he Summoned a book from their bedroom and opened it. "You know, if you want to, you should go be a phoenix for awhile," she offered.

"Really? I thought you thought I was doing that too much."

"I shouldn't try to control what you do."

"I see. When did this new way of thinking start?"

She glared at him; he sighed. "It was a joke."

"Not a very funny one. And I've told you it's not a good idea to make jokes that have a suggestion that I did something wrong, because some jokes aren't really jokes."

"That was meant as a joke. Seriously, there was nothing to it. I know you don't try to control what I do." He paused. "You're really sure, you don't mind?"

"Yes, I'm sure. There's plenty of things I can do."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll try not to be too long." He kissed her on the cheek, became a phoenix, and was gone. Ginny lay flat on the sofa, thinking.

That idiot, thought Hermione, as she looked at the book she'd become distracted from by Harry's emotions coming through as they had. Based on his reactions, she could guess how their conversation had gone. She's not acting too bright either, but especially he should know better.

Hermione normally tried to avoid thinking consciously about Harry's affairs, since she could accidentally send what she was feeling. But Harry was now a phoenix, so she didn't have to worry about it. She was sure she understood what was happening: Ginny told Harry he could go because she wanted him to choose to stay anyway, proving he valued her over being a phoenix. Harry took her assurances at face value instead of doing what he thinks is best for her, because being a phoenix is what he wants to do. Since she told him he could, he's off the hook. Damn them.

She wanted to have Flora tell Harry to come back, go to their home, and talk some sense into them, but of course she

couldn't; she had long since learned not to get in the middle of their problems, especially when she got her information through their link. Once while Ginny was pregnant with James, Harry and Ginny had been having an argument, and at one point Harry had started off a sentence with the unfortunate words, 'Hermione thinks...' Ginny had been livid, as the argument had nothing to do with Hermione, and Hermione was dragged into it against her will. Since then, Hermione had been very circumspect about anything connected to a possible conflict between Harry and Ginny, trying to avoid seeming to take sides or commenting too much. Harry had assured her that he wouldn't make the same mistake again, and she knew he was sincere, but she still tried to be careful.

She felt awful for them; she could only imagine how she would feel if it were her child. It had to be scary for Ginny; Hermione felt she shouldn't be alone. But Hermione hesitated to go see Ginny, thinking that perhaps hers wasn't the face Ginny needed to see right then. They were still good friends, but a slight distance had opened up between them over the past few years because of her link with Harry. Hermione thought Ginny felt that Hermione would tend to take Harry's side of a problem, or be more inclined to see things from his point of view. She tried to think about what would be helpful for Ginny...

Ginny heard the pop of an Apparation, followed by, "Anyone home?" She sat up on the sofa. "Neville! What are you doing here?"

"I can't just decide to come by? Hermione's reading, and I wanted to see how you were doing."

"You mean, Hermione noticed that Harry became a phoenix, and decided that I could use your company," Ginny

corrected him, her tone making it clear that she was happy to see him.

"Well, maybe, but what is said was still true." Neville paused, then whispered, "Actually, I'm here to resume our torrid affair."

Ginny laughed. It was a joke they'd started at the beginning of Neville's seventh year at Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione were both busy—him teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts while still a student, her being Head Girl, and both practicing Legilimency with each other—and were often absent from the Gryffindor common room, which often meant that Neville and Ginny were the only two of their group there. The joke had its basis in the fact that they had gone to the Christmas Ball together, the only year it had been held. It had been awkward for both of them, but they'd managed to have a good time. Three years later Ginny reminded Neville of that, and joked that they would now have many chances to continue their 'torrid affair,' and it had become a running joke for the two of them all year. "I'd almost forgotten about that," she chuckled.

Neville affected a disappointed expression. "Must not have been as torrid as I thought, then. Of course, when I was fourteen, just going to a dance with a girl was pretty torrid, for me."

"You were sweet then, and you're sweet now," smiled Ginny. "Thank you, Neville. You've always been able to make me laugh, and I could really use it right now."

"James is in bed?"

She nodded. "Then I told Harry to go be a phoenix. I know it's what he wants to do anyway, and I don't want him sitting

around wishing he were someplace else. He's not doing me any good if that's the case."

"He may not have been wishing especially," suggested Neville. "Maybe after you said that to him, he thought it meant you needed to be alone."

"Did Hermione tell you that?"

Neville shook his head. "I wouldn't be here then, would I? No, I have no idea what he thought, and I think she'd rather not know either. I think she's happy when he's a phoenix because she doesn't have to worry about thinking too loud."

"I guess there's a point," Ginny agreed. "Sometimes it bugs me, but sometimes I feel sorry for them. It's this thing they can't control. Like, Voldemort's legacy."

"I think she actually used that phrase once," said Neville.

"Were you going to ask me how I felt about the James thing?"

Again, Neville shook his head. "Not especially. I figured you'd talk about it if you wanted to, or maybe you don't want to think about it. I have no idea what might be best for you. I just wanted you to have someone to talk to, if you wanted to."

"I'm just so glad this isn't public, I don't think I could take it. Of course, not everyone believes in reincarnation anyway." She paused; Neville could see the pain in her eyes. "I'm scared, Neville. I'm scared that I won't be able to love him the way I used to. And that I just used the words 'used to.' This whole thing is so awful..."

"You'll be able to," Neville assured her. "You just have to adjust, get used to it."

"Harry's had no trouble," said Ginny unhappily. "He was playing with James before bed like he usually does, James was laughing, being his usual self, Harry was telling James how much he loves him. Why am I so bothered by this when Harry's not? There must be something wrong with me..."

"There isn't," said Neville. "People react differently to things, is all. You and Harry just have different personalities. If he was reacting like you, you wouldn't feel so bad, because you'd feel like it was more natural. You could help each other feel better about it. I'm pretty sure he'd want to help you."

"He's said that, tonight, and he's tried to talk to me about it... I think I just need time, I don't think anything he says is going to help." She paused, then smiled. "But I'm glad you're here. You can make me laugh some more."

He smiled in return. "I'll do my best. And then I'll treat you to some of that hot, hot Longbottom lovin'."

Ginny laughed loudly. "I bet Hermione loves it when you do that with her."

"Oh, no, she can't take it," replied Neville, deadpan and earnest. "I'm too much man for her."

Ginny laughed again, not for the last time of the evening. She later reflected that it was an indication of how much Hermione cared for her that she sent Neville over, knowing that he could help her more than Hermione herself could.

"Now, there are just a few more budgetary concerns. I direct your attention to scroll three, line two hundred twenty-five..."

For the tenth time in the last hour, Minerva McGonagall repressed an urge to roll her eyes as she found the proper line on the proper scroll. As headmistress of Hogwarts, she had to meet with the governors once every three months to give a report on the running of the school and discuss financial matters. The meetings were an utter waste of time, she felt; they were just so the governors could feel as though they were exercising control and doing their job. Governors were appointed by the Minister of Magic and served until the age of eighty. The job required no more than twenty hours of attention per year, if that much, but to McGonagall's consternation, they took it rather seriously.

Things were running smoothly, however, and it seemed as though they were trying very hard to find things to criticize, or at least bring up. She recalled that Dumbledore had always been unperturbed by the meetings, but then, he had been unperturbed by nearly everything. If he were a king, we could have called him 'Albus the Unperturbable,' she thought, in a rare moment of mental whimsy.

"Headmistress?"

"Yes, line two hundred twenty-five, go ahead..."

She continued to suffer through the painfully boring ordeal. Poor Harry, she thought, he'll hate this when he gets this job. He may be the most powerful wizard in history, but he's not patient. Well, he already knows that magic doesn't solve every problem in life, and he still has yet to encounter many. At least it's only once every three months. She recalled Dumbledore telling her that when he took over the job, it had been once a month; he had managed to slowly decrease the frequency of the meetings over his long tenure. A wonderful legacy to future headmasters, she thought dryly. Harry might have this job for as long as a half-century; if he

could get it down to once a year, it would be a more impressive achievement than any magic he can do.

The meeting finally ended; the governors thanked McGonagall for her time. She put her papers and scrolls in her bag, and left the meeting area. She walked through the Ministry halls, heading for the nearest fireplace out. She supposed it was a reasonable precaution that many areas of the Ministry didn't allow for Apparation, but it could be annoying at times.

Such as when one wanted to return home, but was intercepted before one could get away. "Headmistress!" shouted Governor Wyatt, walking briskly to catch up to her.

She did allow herself to roll her eyes before she turned around. "What can I do for you, Governor Wyatt?"

"May I talk to you for a moment, privately? I would like your advice about..." He lowered his voice. "A problem within the group, I would appreciate your guidance..."

"I do not intend to be drawn into any internal political battles—"

"It's nothing like that, I assure you. Please."

She reluctantly agreed, and allowed herself to be led into the small meeting room nearby. "Now, what can I do for you, Governor?"

In shock, she watched as ropes began to whirl around her. She was too slow going for her wand, and was quickly immobilized. "What are you doing?" she demanded, outraged.

He smiled, an evil smile of which she wouldn't have thought Wyatt, a quiet, unassuming man, capable. "What I would have liked to do for a long time, ever since you brought that essay I wrote for your class to the attention of Professor Dumbledore. The one about werewolves."

Her eyes went wide. "Lucius Malfoy," she breathed.

"At your service," he again smiled. "I only regret that our time is limited, so I cannot spend the time with you that I would strongly prefer to. You would not be so arrogant and condescending under the Cruciatus Curse, I am sure."

Summoning her most arrogant and condescending expression, she countered, "And why, pray tell, do we not have enough time?" She knew she was as good as dead, but she decided to try to keep him talking for as long as possible, since he had referred to time being limited.

"If you are noticed missing for any length of time, it is possible that Granger's phoenix, or Potter as a phoenix, could find you. My master has decided that cannot be risked."

"Your master?" she repeated, stunned. "Your master is dead!"

"Obviously not, since he has given me instructions," responded an amused Malfoy.

"You are no doubt delusional, but it doesn't matter," she said scornfully. "You may kill me, but you will no longer be safe. The whole wizarding world will be looking for you once they know you are active again. Polyjuice Potion will not be effective against those who are on guard."

"You will be dead in minutes. No one will know it was me."

She laughed. "You are truly stupid. Dumbledore is still in the place between worlds, and can still talk to Harry if he chooses. I will meet him, and through him relay the information. You appear not to have thought of that."

He laughed dismissively. "There is no such thing as life after death."

"Really," she said calmly, as if what he said had been most interesting. "Perhaps you will indulge a dying woman's curiosity. Why bother killing me? Harry will take my place, and you cannot kill him."

"He will be... neutralized, let us say. Killing you, besides being enjoyable for me, will ensure that Hogwarts will fall into less capable hands. My master's objective is chaos, which your death will serve to further."

"How can you possibly neutralize someone who can do any magic he wants, without a wand?"

Malfoy smiled again. "You are trying to buy time, hoping for rescue. I must finish my business and go." He approached her.

She raised her eyebrows. "No Killing Curse?"

"Your death will appear to be a heart attack. My master does not wish to draw Potter's attention to him."

McGonagall chuckled. "Too late."

"You are quite smug, for someone who is about to die."

"I've had a good life, I am content. I will soon be meeting Albus, and relaying this fascinating information—"

She gasped for breath as Malfoy magically pinched the arteries leading to her heart; it was a common method of stealthy assassination throughout wizarding history.

"I will—be seeing you soon," she gasped, then passed out.

"I don't think so," muttered Malfoy. He made sure she was dead, then Summoned the Invisibility Cloak off the unconscious and bound man in the corner of the room, the real Governor Wyatt. Malfoy unbound the man and performed a Memory Charm, causing him to think that he had been about to talk to McGonagall when she clutched at her chest and collapsed. He then drank more Polyjuice Potion to assume the identity of another nondescript wizard, revived Wyatt, and quickly left the room.

McGonagall was disoriented. She could see nothing; she felt free, and good. She was safe. I like it here, wherever it is, she thought. Is this what I think it is? There's only one way to find out.

Albus?

Yes, Minerva. I am here.

Oh, Albus, it's so good to... not see you, I can't really see, but I can feel you. It's good to be near you. I missed you.

I have not missed you, as I have been able to keep an eye on you.

Did you see how I died?

Yes, I did. You will be greatly missed by those you leave behind.

We must talk to Harry the next time he sleeps. We must let him know that Malfoy is active again, that 'his master' threatens chaos.

I'm sorry, Minerva, but I will not.

Then I will. Just help me talk to him.

I will not; it would be the same thing. I must not interfere in physical events beyond what I intended when I came here. That is accomplished; Voldemort is defeated. I am here only to chat with Harry now and then, as I promised him I would.

You would not help him, when those he cares about may be threatened?

I am sure that Harry explained to you why I do not involve myself in physical events. It would inappropriately interfere with the spiritual journeys of others.

We have plenty of time. Perhaps you would explain it to me in exhaustive detail.

I would be very happy to.

You are every bit as exasperating as you were at times when we were alive.

I know.

And I love you every bit as much as I did when we were alive.

I know. And I love you as well.

I wish, Albus, that if this had to happen, that it had happened before, rather than after, that meeting with the governors.

Dumbledore laughed.

It was a few minutes after ten later that night when Harry teleported the last of the teachers to the Hogwarts staff room. He had found the teachers who didn't live at Hogwarts and placed a message, spelled out in magically hovering letters, in front of them. Emergency meeting at Hogwarts, may I teleport you?

Trying very hard to keep his emotions in check, Harry addressed the group. "I just found out that Professor McGonagall is dead." There were gasps of shock; Harry blinked repeatedly and choked back sobs. "She was at the Ministry, they say it was a heart attack. By the time they got to her, it was too late." Hermione burst out in sobs; she had found out as soon as Harry, through the link, and had been crying most of the time since then.

Most of the teachers looked stunned; tears were starting to come to Sprout's eyes, and her phoenix appeared on her shoulder. Snape was clearly surprised, but keeping any sadness hidden. "It did not happen during the governors meeting?"

"Just afterwards, apparently. She was in a meeting room having a conversation with Governor Wyatt when she collapsed. He ran to get help, but it was too late."

"I suspect foul play," said Snape.

Despite his sadness, Harry smiled a little. "You would."

"I am perfectly serious," responded Snape. "The headmistress was in robust health for a person of her age; she should have lived another fifteen years easily. She had a physical examination every year; a heart defect should have been found."

"That's what I thought, too," agreed a sniffing Hermione. "But Pansy says that these things can happen suddenly. Exams catch a lot of heart problems, but not all."

Snape said nothing further, but looked unconvinced.

John spoke quietly. "I assume you're going to be the new headmaster."

"Most of the governors were still there when I got there. They were shocked, but they said they were sure there would be no problems confirming my appointment. But I'm not sure that's what I want to do. I thought I would have ten more years; I'm not sure I'm ready for it. I mean, I'm still only twenty-two."

"As she and I both told you four years ago, it is about leadership," said Snape. "Not age. The kinds of things you may have problems with will be minor, and the others and myself can help you with them. You will be fine." Sprout and Flitwick nodded.

"Thanks," said Harry to Snape. "I guess I just needed someone to tell me that. It seems a bit much. I'll tell the students tomorrow during breakfast, and we'll have the memorial service after dinner. Should we cancel classes?"

There was a short silence. "She would not have wanted us to," said Snape.

Harry nodded, imagining what she would say if she could. "You're right about that. She'd want there to be a minimum of 'fuss,' as she would put it."

"That doesn't mean that we shouldn't do it, though," suggested Sprout. "It's as much for us as for the students. I think I'd rather have the day to grieve, to remember her. It's

also a sign of respect. I think she deserved it, even if she wouldn't want it." Hermione sent her agreement through their link.

He found her argument compelling. "Okay, I'll announce that classes are canceled. Hermione, I assume you're okay to be the deputy headmistress?"

"I suppose so. I know she wanted me to, and she'd be annoyed if I argued. I just feel like I wouldn't be ready if anything happened to you."

"Nothing's going to happen to him, Hermione," said Sprout. "You'll have the safest job in the world. You'll be the deputy headmistress for the next sixty years."

She met Harry's eyes. "That'd be fine with me."

"McGonagall should be dead by now, and Lucius, on his way back," said Drake. "Once Potter is moved out of the picture, will Granger be the headmistress? Or will it go to someone else, like Snape?"

Hugo thought. "It's very difficult to say; either is a real possibility. Harry being gone will be a shock to Hermione, she won't have her usual confidence. My best guess is that she'll ask Sprout to do it, but if the security situation is unsettled, she'll ask Snape."

"The governors won't involve themselves in the decision-making?"

"They've always allowed the headmasters to choose their successors. Harry won't be dead, so they'll be hesitant to override his wishes. They don't want to be on his bad side; he still is Harry Potter."

As Hugo was finishing his sentence, Lucius Malfoy Apparated in. Drake cast Legilimency to get his report. As Drake viewed Malfoy's memories, Hugo saw very rapid changes in Drake's mood; his face was still fairly calm, but he was clearly disbelieving and very angry. He put down his wand and turned to Hugo. "Brantell, I want your thoughts about the consequences of Malfoy's actions. He killed McGonagall, but not before letting her know it was him, and making oblique references to me."

Hugo couldn't help it; he broke into a chuckle. Suddenly furious, Malfoy raised his wand, but Drake pressed Malfoy's arm down. "It is funny, from where he stands. I will not punish him for recognizing a truth. Consider yourself lucky that I do not punish you for your astounding stupidity. McGonagall was right about that. They will now know you are back, and will be on high alert. You have complicated my plans greatly, and my plans for Potter will be extraordinarily difficult to execute. I must now review the situation from top to bottom."

Hugo didn't want to say what he was going to say, but he knew Drake would find it in his mind at some point, and punish him for not saying it when he thought of it. "It may not happen that way. Dumbledore may refuse to interfere; Harry said that he was very specific about what he would do from there."

Drake looked thoughtful. "McGonagall intended to interfere, but she needs Dumbledore to do it. I suppose we will know tomorrow, by whether or not there is a full alert for all wizards to be on the lookout for Malfoy, or unusual measures intended to detect users of Polyjuice Potion."

He turned to Malfoy. "Your old master would have given you a long spell of torture for that, though he would not have

recognized the danger. You are fortunate that I only punish disobedience, not idiocy. I know you do not believe in life after death, but that is irrelevant. From this point forward, you will operate on the assumption that anyone you kill who is close to Potter, or very close to someone close to him, could inform Potter of what happened in their last moments. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," responded Malfoy evenly.

"You will no longer toy with those you are about to kill, you will simply kill them, unless I have authorized exceptions."

"Yes, Master."

"You will not speak to them unless so instructed."

"Yes, Master."

Drake dismissed Malfoy with a gesture; Malfoy left the room. Drake sighed. "This is why I hesitate to make you a slave, in addition to the time investment required. The required conditioning makes the person shy away from creative, independent thought, which is part of your purpose."

Thank goodness for small favors, thought Hugo. "From how angry you were, I thought you were going to torture him, on general principle."

Drake chuckled mirthlessly. "There would be no point; it would be like punishing a dog for doing something he did not know was wrong. Random torture undermines the conditioning he has undergone; if a person may be tortured at any time for no reason, there is a greater tendency to think as one wishes, since one may be tortured anyway. Torture must be applied only for knowing disobedience, or for conditioning purposes. I could specifically condition him

not to do as he has done, but it's unnecessary. He'll do as I tell him; in some cases he simply needs very specific direction."

Despite himself, Hugo was curious. "Why doesn't he get angry when you insult him?"

"Part of the conditioning is to accept everything I say as the truth, whether it contradicts what he believes or not. I must only take care not to assert what his senses tell him is false, such as that there's no table in front of him when there is. He would be forced to conclude that either I, or his senses, were incorrect, either of which would be counterproductive. In any case... for now, you will work on contingency plans in the event that Potter learns of Malfoy's identity." Drake dismissed Hugo.

As Hugo walked back to his quarters, he reflexively shoved back the idea that he hoped Dumbledore would tell Harry about Malfoy. Hope still existed, but only as a concept.

Harry called a halt to the energy-of-love portion of the seventh-year Gryffindor/Slytherin Defense Against the Dark Arts class. He still devoted fifteen or twenty minutes of each double class to it, even though there was one class wholly devoted to it. When he had been teaching as a seventh-year student, teaching each year double classes took twenty-eight hours of his week, which was difficult when added to his studies. When he had no studies, he'd thought about having one more hour with each class, for a total of forty-two teaching hours, but had decided to go a bit easier on himself by instituting a new, once-a-week energy of love class which included all four Houses of a particular year. That only had to be done once a week for each year's students, so he taught thirty-five hours a week. He found that to be more than enough.

"Okay, we're done for today, unless anyone has any questions."

Augustina raised her hand. "How are you feeling, about Professor McGonagall?"

It was the first day after classes had resumed; Harry had choked up more than once while speaking at her memorial service the day before. "Still pretty sad. She was a good friend, and like I said yesterday, a lot more funny and natural than the impression you might have had of her. I'll really miss her."

"Does being really sad interfere with your—well, not you, but anyone's ability to use the energy of love?"

"No, I'm pretty sure it doesn't. Only anger or hate. If someone you love was killed, then of course that would be an issue. It would be pretty hard not to be angry in that situation, as I know very well. You might be able to channel that anger into a different emotion, but that's hard to do. If you can't, you might be better off saying to yourself, okay, I'm not going to be able to use it until I get over this, and allow yourself to grieve and be angry until the worst of it passes. The point would be to not put extra pressure on yourself. But fortunately, that situation is pretty rare these days.

"Okay, we're out of time. See you next week. Hedrick and Helen, would you stay behind for a minute?"

They approached his desk. "Is this a Head Girl and Boy thing?" asked Helen.

"No," said Harry, deadpan. "I was just wondering when you two were going to schedule the wedding. Spring is pretty good."

Hedrick looked surprised; Helen, mildly annoyed.
"Professor..."

Harry shrugged, keeping up the pretense. "Hey, I can't help it, that phoenix intuition can be pretty strong. It really tells me things."

They both smiled, pleased that Harry liked them enough to make jokes. "Did you have us stay back just so you could make fun of us, Professor?" asked Helen.

"No. Well, partly. The main thing was to thank you for all the work you did organizing the memorial service yesterday. You both did a good job."

"Thank you, Professor," said both.

"I should also say, though, on a kind of Head Boy/Girl topic, that you two might want to be careful about the necking in the halls."

Both immediately went pink, to Harry's amusement, but Helen remained defiant. "We check the map carefully," she protested. "You'd never even know if it wasn't for your remote eye."

"Well, yes, but that's not exactly what the patrolling is for, though it is what the couples' places are for. And you can rest assured that the remote eye never looks at the couples' places. There are many things I don't need to know."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Hedrick, still slightly embarrassed.

"However... does one of you have the map, by the way?"
Helen reached into her robe and handed Harry the cosmetics catalog, which Pansy had given them when she graduated

from Hogwarts. He opened the map and activated it, and cast a spell on it silently as he spoke. "Since I'm concerned about you getting caught by someone like Filch... or Professor Snape, who would then give me a hard time for encouraging you..." He handed them back the map. "It has a new feature. When you activate the feature, it'll beep if anyone gets to within ten feet of being on a line of sight, wherever you are."

They smiled. "Cool feature," chuckled Hedrick.

"How do we activate it?" asked Helen. "What's the keyword?"

"Spring," he said. All three laughed. "You're bad," Helen admonished him.

"I'm sure Hermione would agree with you," he joked. He paused, getting an impression. "Speaking of Hermione, she says there's someone here to see me. I guess that's going to be happening a lot more now."

"Professor," said Hedrick quickly, before Harry could teleport away. "We're sad about what happened to Professor McGonagall... but we're happy that you're the headmaster."

Harry nodded, a little sadly. "I just wish it could have been because she retired. But thanks, I appreciate it." He teleported away.

Hedrick and Helen exchanged a glance. "I feel like we should be sadder about Professor McGonagall's death, like he and the other teachers are," said Hedrick guiltily.

Helen nodded. "I know what you mean, but she hadn't taught for four years, and we couldn't really get to know her,

like we know Professor Potter. She kept this distance. It's hard to be that sad when you really didn't know the person."

"I suppose," he agreed as they walked toward the classroom door. "By the way, are we going to tell the others about the map?"

She chuckled. "That was nice of him. No, I don't see the point. We're the only ones who really can use it, they wouldn't need it, and they'd just make fun of us anyway. They can just use the couples' places. Not that we can't, but this is more convenient." As they walked out of the classroom, they didn't notice Matthew near the door on the outside, having been about to enter the room.

Harry appeared next to Hermione, in the staff room. He gestured silently, asking who wanted to see him.

"It's for both of us, apparently," she said. "A goblin, from Gringotts."

"Isn't that kind of redundant?" he joked.

She didn't suppress her annoyance. "That's such a stereotype—"

"I know, I'm kidding. I'm sure there are plenty of other goblins who don't work for Gringotts and have nothing to do with banking."

"And they're not all nasty and unpleasant," she added.

"I never knew any who weren't," remarked Snape casually.

"I doubt you spent much time around goblins," countered Hermione.

"In fact, I did," said Snape, an eyebrow raised at Hermione, silently needling her for assuming things she shouldn't.

She sighed and tried to keep her disapproval off her face. "I have a feeling I don't want to hear the story."

"I didn't offer to tell it. But yes, you are probably correct. Just something for you to think about. Some stereotypes are stereotypes for a reason."

She turned to Harry. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah. Where is he?"

"The front gate, but don't teleport us there, okay? I'd like to walk. I think it's good to walk sometimes." They left the staff room.

"I walk sometimes. I walk to the Burrow every Sunday night. I just didn't want to keep the goblin waiting."

"So thoughtful of you," she retorted, not buying it.

"And I also exercise sometimes. I have my exercise room at home, and the pool."

"Both of which you don't use much. Especially recently, I'd bet."

"Well, I have been flying. That counts as exercise."

"I somehow doubt that the exercise you get as a phoenix does your human body any good."

He shrugged. "It just seems like there's always so much to do. I feel like I'm taking time away from Ginny and James if I exercise, or do things like that." Hermione sent a feeling unintentionally, that it was hard to think about James

without thinking of Draco Malfoy. "He's not Malfoy," snapped Harry.

"All right, all right, don't bite my head off," protested Hermione.

"Sorry, it's just that it still bothers Ginny, and I wish it didn't. I know she can't help it. I'm just worried, because she tries, but she's not the same with him as she used to be. I'm worried about the effect it might have on him." They exited the castle gate, being sure to keep their voices down when discussing the Malfoy topic.

"It really doesn't bother you," she said, impressed; she knew it was true, getting his feelings through the link. "It would bother me. Maybe it wouldn't be rational, but it would bother me. I can really empathize with Ginny about that. Why aren't you bothered?"

"I just felt that what that Healer, Vasquez, said was right, it just sounded right. Magic, especially Dark magic, shouldn't—can't, I'm sure—affect the spiritual realm, and James is still as James as he's ever been. Also, you know about how phoenixes can see through people, that sense they have. I've been a phoenix around James, I can see what he's like. There's no Malfoy in there, I'd see it if there was. It's just James, just an ordinary, happy two-year-old boy. I've told Ginny, and she kind of believes me, but I can tell it doesn't really help. It's like she's in this frame of mind she can't get past. It's all I can do not to say, it's him already, will you please get over this?"

Hermione's eyebrows went up. "If you want to make the situation ten times worse, that's the thing to say."

"I know that much. I try to be patient, I'm doing my best."

But you still go out as a phoenix most nights, she sent, half-intentionally.

He shot her a glare. "Are you really going to hassle me about that?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have sent that." Harry could sense that she regretted having sent it, but still felt she was right. "It just seems like it's not the best thing to do in your situation. I'm not trying to poke my nose in."

"I know," he admitted. Their link had caused each to send feelings on many occasions that they'd rather not have sent, so both knew how easy it was to do. "I just think she needs some time alone right now, try to sort things out. She doesn't need me to keep telling her it's going to be all right."

Hermione forced her mind away from the topic, as she still didn't agree with him but didn't want to send more unsolicited advice. "Look, there he is." She pointed to the gate.

"I wonder why he didn't come through the gate. Maybe it's some goblin rule."

"You should read up on goblins, learn about their culture," she suggested.

"Yes, because I have all this free time."

"You know what I mean. It's a good idea. You're the headmaster now, you may have dealings with them."

He would have responded, but they were close to the gate. He nodded politely at the goblin. "Can I help you?"

"Harry Potter? Hermione Granger?"

Harry hadn't had to identify himself for a very long time; he answered by moving his hair to reveal his scar. Hermione elbowed him in the ribs. "Yes, that's us," she said.

The goblin reached into a brown bag and pulled out a package, and a piece of parchment that Harry could tell was a proof-of-delivery form. He held out the parchment. "Tap with your wands here."

Hermione did so. "You may have heard, I don't use a wand anymore," Harry pointed out. "How about a finger?"

"No wand, no delivery. That's the rule." The goblin had the expression of a bored bureaucrat doing a tedious job.

"Well, heaven knows I wouldn't want any special treatment," said Harry sarcastically. Remembering that he kept his old wand in a bedroom drawer, he caused it to appear in his hand, and used it to tap the parchment.

"That'll be five Galleons."

"Five Galleons?!" exclaimed Harry. "For what?"

"Personal delivery."

This goblin was clearly not given to long sentences. Harry was starting to wonder if they really wanted the package. Not that he didn't have enough money, but five Galleons was a lot, and shouldn't the sender have paid? "Who sent this?"

The goblin looked at the paper. "Minerva McGonagall."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a startled look; Harry summoned five Galleons from his money chest at home. "I'm sure Hogwarts will reimburse you," she said.

"I'd imagine so, since the deputy headmistress is in charge of Hogwarts' petty cash." Harry accepted the package; the goblin turned, took a few steps, and Disapparated.

Harry and Hermione started back to the castle. "You know, Snape was really wrong about goblins," Harry couldn't resist saying.

She ignored his jibe, and reached for an envelope attached to the package. Opening it, she read, "Open this in private, near your Pensieve. If anyone other than Harry Potter tries to open this package, they will regret it."

"Wonder what would happen," he said.

"Well, now I'm really curious about what's inside it. Teleport us to your office."

Harry looked up, and around the grounds. "I don't know, it's such a nice day, the walking would do us good. Look, there's Hagrid's hut, we could stop for a cup of—"

She sent him the impression that she was mildly annoyed, but if he continued, she would become truly annoyed. "Oh, all right," he conceded, and they were suddenly in his office. "But will you admit that teleporting is just a convenience, and not for the purpose of avoiding exercise?"

"As long as it gets you to open that package, yes." He did so, and was soon holding a glass cylinder containing silvery material resembling what went into a Pensieve. Etched into the glass were the words, 'place in the Pensieve.' Harry did,

then he used his unusual abilities to display the image in the air in front of them.

It was McGonagall. "Harry, Hermione. If you are viewing this, it means that I did not make it to my retirement. I had hoped to tell you this in person.

"The main reason for this message is to make sure you are informed of a secret which is known only to Hogwarts headmasters. There is a vault in the headmaster's office which contains a fortune in Galleons, jewels, and a few other valuable items. I do not know the exact value of it all, but Albus was told that there were at least five million Galleons. This has been here for hundreds of years; it is not known who placed it there originally. The coins would be even more valuable than their face value because of their great age.

"The purpose of this treasure is for whatever contingency may cause its use to become necessary. I cannot quite imagine what that would be, but one never knows what will happen. Albus was told that one purpose was to keep Hogwarts relatively independent and free from a possible Ministry takeover. The governors are no more than figureheads, to be humored for the sake of appearances; a relatively weak headmaster two hundred years ago allowed their creation, and the rest of us have suffered for it since then. When I say 'independent,' I mean not only in a leadership sense, but also free from dependence on Ministry funding. We do get a yearly stipend from the Ministry, of course, and it is mostly sufficient. The Ministry, however, in antagonistic hands, could use Hogwarts' funding as a lever to push their own agenda, take over in small ways. This fund allows a Hogwarts headmaster to resist such pressure. If the Ministry were to react by cutting Hogwarts' funding entirely, this treasure would allow Hogwarts to continue operating for at least one hundred years. Such an eventuality is, of

course, not expected. This is, by the way, one reason that when Albus fled the school in your fifth year, he made sure that Umbridge could not enter the headmaster's office; he wanted to make absolutely sure that she had no opportunity to find out about, or access, this money. That year was the most recent time using the fund was seriously considered, to keep Umbridge out. Albus discussed it with the portraits, but he and they decided that the situation could be managed without such open warfare.

"You may be wondering how it is that an unscrupulous headmaster, or at least one susceptible to temptation, has not absconded with some or all of the treasure. We try to choose headmasters wisely, of course, but the depositor of the treasure took a stronger precaution. You may be aware that only the fifteen previous headmasters' portraits are on the wall of the headmaster's office; I imagine you will be seeing my portrait there soon. I am the sixty-third headmaster or headmistress, so the wall could become even more unruly than it is now if it were not limited to the most recent fifteen. If the current headmaster wants to access the funds, he must explain the reason to the past headmasters' portraits. Ten of the portraits must agree; if they do not, the fund cannot be accessed. I understand that the fund has only been accessed once in Hogwarts' history, but not much of it was used.

"Harry, I tell you this largely so that you can tell it to the next headmaster, in case Hermione decides to retire before you, or at the same time. This will not be relevant to you for more than one reason: with your status, the Ministry would not dare oppose you, and in an emergency you could always conjure money, though I know you'd prefer not to. It is a part of Hogwarts' legacy, however, and valuable for the security it brings.

"Needless to say, you are to tell no one of this, not even Ginny and Neville. Not a single person. If this became known, the Ministry might try to greatly decrease or entirely stop Hogwarts' funding. Normally I would not even be telling Hermione—this is supposed to be restricted to headmasters only—but as you'll be taking over at a very young age, you may want Hermione's advice on such matters.

"After you view this, break the container and allow the memory to dissipate. Good luck, Harry, though I'm sure you'll do fine. Many people care about you and will want to help you; just listen to them. Perhaps I will talk to you one more time, when you talk to Albus next." The image faded.

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances as they sat, silently trading feelings about what they'd just seen. "Part of me wants to keep this," said Harry, taking the cylinder out of the Pensieve.

"I can understand that," she agreed. "But just remember what she'd say if you did."

He chuckled. "I wouldn't want to hear it." He held the container in both hands, and performed a Severing Charm; the cylinder split perfectly down the middle. The memory oozed out, and faded into nothingness.

Drake had thought long and hard about how to neutralize Potter, and come up empty. There was just nothing to be done against someone who could defend himself against literally anything, peer inside anyone's mind at will, and who could see through any disguise just by deciding to look. Knowing that Potter preferred not to use those powers was of little help; as soon as anyone he cared about was in danger, he would use them. He had saved a hundred people he hadn't even known at the World Trade Center, so Drake

knew that as soon as he got too aggressive in his activities, Potter would become less reserved about using his unusual talents.

Potter's ability to become a phoenix Animagus, however, had opened up a possible new line of attack. He needed to get inside Potter's home to do what he wanted to do. If successful, it would take Potter out of the equation, but it was a huge risk. Potter could simply be anywhere, anytime. Drake decided to send Brenda to make the attempt; as a safety precaution, she had been provided with an explosive that she could activate with a wave of her wand. She had been told to activate it if seen by Potter in her human form. There was still the risk that he could cast the Imperius Charm on her if he took her by surprise, but it had to be chanced.

She had observed that every Sunday night between seven-thirty and nine o'clock four of them, sometimes all six, left the home and walked to the Burrow together. That was the time to act. Helping matters greatly was the fact that in placing magical protection on his home, Potter had apparently made a small but significant oversight. His version of the Fidelius Charm prevented anyone from seeing his home... except an Animagus in animal form. As a human, Brenda could not see his house. As a dog, she could. It's always the little things, thought Drake. Fortunately, no one in Potter's circle of friends was an Animagus, so he had not found out.

As a collie, Brenda waited patiently on Sunday night for Harry and the others to leave the house. Finally they did. When they were a little less than half the distance to the Burrow, Brenda darted out from behind a tree and raced for the front door; she had no way of knowing how much time

she would have. Someone had left the front door slightly ajar, and she nosed her way in.

Keeping an eye out for the house-elf, whose movements couldn't be predicted, she made her way through the house, looking for his bedroom. She found it, making sure by looking around that it wasn't a guest bedroom. It was time for the riskiest part of the operation: becoming human. It wasn't known if Potter had set the home to recognize the presence of an intruder, or the entrance of one, or if he had just trusted his charms to keep out intruders altogether, making such alarms unnecessary.

She transformed into a human, and waited a few seconds; no reaction. Ready to set off the explosive on a second's notice, she threw the Invisibility Cloak over herself in case the house-elf came by. She then used the glasses he'd given her, the ones that allowed her to see through anything. She quickly found the chest where his clean clothes were kept, and took out the vial of liquid. She quickly but methodically poured a small amount onto several pairs, the ones nearest the top, of socks, underwear, and undershirts.

Her mission accomplished, she now needed to get out as soon as possible. She became a dog again, this time using the Invisibility Cloak as a dog, again clutching it with her mouth so that it covered her. She left the bedroom, went down the hall, moving very slowly as she passed the kitchen, which the house-elf was now busily cleaning. He noticed nothing, however, and she continued on her way, finally reaching the front door, which was still ajar. She nosed her way out, and took off for the trees.

Drake was not given to emotional reactions, but Hugo sensed a wave of triumph as he watched Drake use Legilimency on Brenda. "Well done, Brenda. Good job." He

never says that kind of thing to Malfoy, mused Hugo. Maybe it has something to do with personality differences. Hugo was not happy, of course. Unless something unexpected happened, many people would soon be in a lot of danger.

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Next, in Chapter 5: Hermione is unexpectedly thrust into the role of Hogwarts headmistress; Snape assists Kingsley as Drake's terror reaches England.

From Chapter 5: "Attack in progress at Diagon Alley!" reported an Auror.

Startled, Kingsley glanced at Snape. "Go," said Snape. "I'll finish up."

Kingsley hated to leave an Auror operation in the hands of a non-Auror, but he knew Snape was a professional and could be trusted, or else he wouldn't have taken Snape along in the first place. He nodded and Disapparated.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

The next morning, wearing her visitor's pass as usual, Luna entered the Muggle Liaison office and greeted Colin and Dudley, "Hello, boys. Is anything happening?"

"In here, no," answered Colin. "In the world, a few things."

She gestured for them to explain; Dudley did. "The main thing is that America's getting more hostile to Iran. Iran is supposedly making nuclear weapons, so America claims. Nobody really believes them, since that was their reason for attacking Iraq, and they turned out to be wrong. But they act like they don't care, like that never happened. And since America is the strongest country in the world, everyone has to take them seriously, whether what they say makes any sense or not."

"Now, why do you follow this again? It has nothing to do with wizards."

"Arthur wants us to be well-versed in Muggle events," explained Colin. "We don't have to be experts, just to follow it every day. Anyway, this is important because it's one of the world's... what they call 'hot spots.' America and Iran have been antagonistic for a long time, and after invading Iraq, America has a whole lot of troops in a country right next to Iran, so America getting more antagonistic means more than it would most of the time. Arthur wants us to follow events like this and ask ourselves, if wizards were manipulating events, would we be able to tell? Is there anything that suggests that?"

"Is there?" she asked.

Both shook their heads. "This is an especially aggressive American president," said Colin. "Apparently he thinks he's going to bring democracy to the Middle East, and that the only way he can do it is by threatening to do it for them if they don't do it themselves."

"That's an exaggeration," said Dudley.

"Not much of one," countered Colin. "Anyway, normally American people don't get into this sort of thing, but nine-eleven sort of changed what they're willing to put up with. The president constantly talks about the 'war on terror,' and everyone agrees that Iran is a country that supports terror. Mainly terror against Israel, not America, but he doesn't say that so much. They're claiming that Iran is working on making nuclear weapons, and he said that America will take 'all necessary measures' to prevent that. In other words, they'll attack Iran if they don't stop."

"Do we know that this president isn't especially aggressive because he's been manipulated by wizards?"

Colin chuckled. "We could ask that about anyone, of course. I meant, more obvious manipulation than that. We hope we'd know it if we saw it."

"Has this department always done this, followed Muggle news this closely?"

"No, this is Arthur's idea. When he came in here he said he was amazed at how uninformed the people in the department were about Muggle society. Don't quote that," added Colin quickly. "He knows wizards really aren't going to manipulate Muggle events, but he thinks wizards have

gotten too lazy about that, and should keep a closer eye on things."

"This is just the Ministry of Magic for England, though," said Luna, an obvious question for her article. "Why not just pay attention to how these things affect Muggle England, and not worry about the rest of the world?"

"Most people think that's only what Arthur should do," agreed Colin. "He thinks all countries' Ministries should do this, but they don't. We could get by with one less person if we didn't do this, but Arthur asked Bright for the budget for one more person, and Bright agreed. Which is no small thing, Undersecretaries and department heads are always fighting for more budget. We think Bright granted the request because of Arthur's connection to Harry, he wants to keep Harry happy, so he'll do what Arthur asks, within reason. We don't think Bright really cares whether we keep track of what Muggles are up to."

Luna nodded. "And I can put that into the article, right?"

Colin and Dudley laughed. "Better if you didn't," said Dudley.

Harry had a busy day; it was the first day of his first full week as the Hogwarts headmaster. He went to the headmaster's office for the first time; McGonagall's portrait was hung over the weekend, and he hadn't wanted to go in until it was. It was strange for him to talk to her portrait, but he didn't have much time to do so in any case. He didn't go home until six o'clock. He knew it wouldn't be like that every day, but was glad to get home.

James had spent most of the day with Molly, as Ginny had practice with the team; next Saturday's match would be a crucial one in deciding the season's championship. They

talked about their day over dinner, and listened to James's attempts to increase his vocabulary. One of the first words he had learned other than 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' was 'Dobby,' which delighted Dobby no end.

After dinner, they went to the living room, where Ginny sat on the sofa while Harry sat on the floor with James, Summoning the colored blocks James sometimes played with. Harry held up one block at a time, asking "What color is it?" each time. James got each of the eight colors right, only the second time he had ever done it.

Harry decided to continue his efforts to teach James magic. Two was a very young age, but he had to start sometime. He picked up a white block. "What color is it?"

"White!"

"Good. Let's change its color. What color do you like?"

"Blue!"

"Okay, I'll do it, then you do it. Blue!" The block promptly turned blue, making James giggle. Harry picked up another white block. "Now, you do it. Make the block blue, you can do it. See it blue, make it blue. Say, 'blue!'"

"Blue!" James yelled enthusiastically, but nothing happened. Harry continued at it for a while, then had an idea. He Summoned a piece of chocolate from the kitchen. James had had chocolate before, but not so often; his eyes lit up.

"You can have this chocolate if you can make it blue," said Harry, his eyes conveying his confidence that James could do it.

"That's not very nice," murmured a smiling Ginny. "You can't give it to him if he doesn't do it."

"He'll do it," Harry mouthed. "Go ahead, James. Say, blue!" Harry had decided that it was too difficult to teach a two-year-old that all he had to do was think about what he wanted to see happen, so instead of focusing on a wand, he had James focus on the word. He knew that if James could do the spells without a wand, it wouldn't be that hard to, when he was a little older, explain that the word wasn't necessary.

"Blue!" shouted a determined James, but nothing happened. James tried for a few minutes, becoming increasingly frantic at the prospect of not getting the chocolate. "Blue! Blue! Blue!" James turned to Harry, sadness in his eyes. "I want chocate!"

"Oh, no, look at that face, those eyes," said Ginny sadly. "How are you going to not give it to him?"

"I'm sorry, James," said Harry sincerely. "You have to make it blue first."

"I want chocate!" James yelled. James had had crying fits, but had never thrown a tantrum; Harry wondered if that might change. Hoping to corral James's intensity, Harry quickly Summoned a white block. "Say blue!"

"Blue!!" James screamed at the block, which suddenly became a light but unmistakable shade of blue. Harry pumped his fist into the air in triumph, shouting "Yes!" Ginny looked amazed. Harry hugged James, kissed him, then gave him the chocolate. He reached up to the sofa and took Ginny's hand. "Do you know what this means?"

"No wands..." she marveled. "Are we going to take him to the Burrow, have him do it for Mum and Dad?"

Harry watched his son contentedly eat the chocolate. He reveled in the moment. "No. He knows he can do it now, and he will if he wants to. I wanted to know if he could do it, and I wanted him to know that he can do it. But as far as I'm concerned, if he doesn't do it for another year, that's fine. He'll be doing it on his own soon enough, and we'll be having to work out how to stop him from doing it when he shouldn't." Harry decided not to mention that what he'd just said were mostly Hermione's thoughts when he'd discussed it with her. He thought she was right, but there was no point telling Ginny every time some idea he had came from Hermione.

"Good point," she agreed. "Well, they'll be thrilled, especially Mum. I'll definitely be telling her tomorrow."

He noticed her relative lack of enthusiasm. "Are you happy?"

She sighed. "Of course. It's just... look, I don't want to talk about it right now."

The Malfoy thing, he thought, annoyed. Turning his head so James couldn't see his face, he looked at her with a pleading expression, but said nothing. Defensively, she whispered, "Don't look at me like that."

Mute, he cast his eyes downward. After a pause, he said, "I think I'll become a phoenix, entertain him a bit before he goes to bed."

"He won't be going to bed anytime soon, after that chocolate. And I suppose that after he does, you'll go for a fly, come back after I'm asleep? It's happened half the nights for the past two weeks." She looked at him sadly. "I remember a time when you were looking forward to spending nights with me. Looks like that time is over."

"That's not fair," he responded angrily, trying to control his emotions for the sake of not displaying anger in front of James. Both were still keeping their voices down. "This phoenix thing is very unusual, and I thought you were okay with what I was doing. You acted like you were."

"I didn't want to stop you from doing what you obviously wanted to do," she responded quietly but forcefully. "I just wish there wasn't such a big difference between how much you want to be a phoenix and how much you want to be around me."

"It's not like that."

"It feels like that to me."

Harry took a deep breath. This is the hard part about marriage, he thought. "I thought you wanted time alone."

"You thought that because that's what you wanted me to want. I take time alone, you go be a phoenix. Works well for you."

"Then I'll stop. I won't do it anymore for a while."

"And then you'll be with me, wanting to be a phoenix. That'll be good for my ego."

He was frustrated, feeling that nothing he could do would make her happy. "What do you want me to do then?"

"I don't know."

Harry moved from the floor and sat on the sofa next to Ginny, taking her hand. She looked at him suspiciously. "If I know you want to be with me, I won't be sitting here wanting to be a phoenix. I promise. I don't want you to feel

like I don't want to be with you, because I do. Please believe that."

Ginny didn't say whether she did or didn't. "Whatever you may want, it ends up being the case that your phoenixing time comes when it would otherwise be with me. And you do want to be a phoenix, I'm not going to believe that you don't."

"How about this, then," he suggested. "We put my ability to stop time to good use. Every night after dinner, I'll stop time for a few hours, however long you want, just you and me. We'll talk, fly on the Firebolts, swim, do other things," he added, with a glance in the direction of the bedroom. "Whatever, just spend time together. Then if I want to be a phoenix, it didn't cost us any time together. What do you think?"

She thought for a minute, then nodded. "That sounds okay. We'll have to see how it goes, make sure it doesn't do bad things to our sleep schedules. Too bad you can't stop time as a phoenix. You really can't do any spells as a phoenix? I know phoenixes don't do magic, but your magic is all mental anyway, and your mind is the same when you're a phoenix."

"Not quite the same," he corrected her, happy that she was willing to give his solution a try. "It's similar, but my mind is a little different when I'm a phoenix. It's a little harder to think as I would as a human, harder to focus on things like facts, easier to get distracted by what it feels like to be a phoenix, which I think is why I'm often late getting back. For example, I can tell you what twelve times seven is if I think about it for a minute, but as a phoenix, I don't think I could. If I could, it would be a real effort, a lot harder than usual. Phoenixes don't think in terms of things like numbers, and my brain is changed a bit when I'm a phoenix."

"Interesting, I didn't know that. Have you told Hermione, or the Magical Research Institute?"

"No, I hadn't even thought about it exactly like that until now. But I'm supposed to give them an interim report in a few weeks, tell them about things I've noticed. Anyway, I have tried to do spells as a phoenix, but I can't. I agree, it would be pretty convenient. But I still think this can work. Do you want to start now?"

"No, I think I'm getting a bit tired, maybe I'll want to go to bed in an hour. Let's start it tomorrow. Would you mind not going out tonight?"

"Okay," he agreed. "I'd just like to do it a little to entertain James until he goes to bed, okay? I won't leave the house."

"All right," she conceded. Harry transformed, flew over to James and let James pet him. After a short while, Ginny put James to bed, and Harry sang for a few minutes. He knew he shouldn't do it too often, or else James might not be able to sleep without it, but once in a while might be okay. She turned out the light, and they left the room to go back to the living room. She pet him for a few seconds. "Okay, he's in bed, let's have human Harry back now."

"So this is a Muggle bar," said Luna, as they sat on stools at a small table, drinks in front of them.

"Yes, but be careful about using that word," said Dudley, just loud enough to be heard by Luna over the noise.

"All right," agreed Luna. She cleared her throat. "So this is a bar for people who don't use magic."

Colin burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's much better," said Dudley sarcastically.

"Nobody would think anything of it anyway," said Luna reasonably. "They'd just think I was being strange. And I'm used to that."

"Yes, well, they'd think I was strange for being around you," pointed out Dudley.

Luna raised her voice a little. "Not as strange as they'd think it was if they heard you worked for the Muggle Liaison office of the—"

"Will you stop that?" demanded Dudley in a loud whisper as Colin laughed again.

Luna smiled at Dudley. "You need to relax, Dudley. Don't worry so much about what people think."

Dudley grunted. "Too late for that. I was raised by a mother who thinks that what people think is really important. Dad too, but he only cares what the 'right' people think, but Mum cares about what anybody thinks, even if she thinks they don't matter. So, how is it that you don't care what people think? I mean, most people do."

"I don't know," she said, appearing to think about it. "I've just always been like this. I think it comes partly from my father. He once said that as long as I was true to myself, it didn't matter what other people thought."

"Harry thinks that was why she was the first person to learn the energy of love," said Colin. "In the class, she would say things that sounded strange to the rest of us, but Harry was always like, 'Very good, Luna,' like she was the only one really on the right track. Then when she got 100, the rest of us were like, huh, we just thought she was being strange. Then the rest of us tried to be more like her, which was very ironic."

"Only in the class, though," Luna interjected. "My fashion sense didn't catch on."

Colin laughed. "I always kind of liked that."

"So, you were good at the energy-of-love thing," said Dudley as he finished his drink. "Did that have to do with that trip you took? You said you stayed in Tibet for a year? Isn't that where they have all these temples and stuff?"

"They have more than that, but I didn't see much of the Muggle religious places," said Luna. "But the Tibetan wizards have a few retreats. I spent a lot of time at the same one Professor Dumbledore did when he was there sixty years ago. They said I was a prodigy."

"Really?" asked Colin, surprised.

Luna nodded. "What were you a prodigy at?" asked Dudley. "What could you do?"

"Contact the spiritual realm," said Luna. "You can do it if you have just the right state of mind. I think being in Harry's class helped me think, or not think, in the right way."

"Harry's tried to explain this 'spiritual realm' thing to me, but I don't get it that well," said Dudley. "I feel like you almost have to believe it just to understand what he's talking about."

"So, you can talk to spirits?" asked a fascinated Colin.

"Yes, but only a few. Most of them don't want to talk to me. Not me personally, just anyone here. I talked to my mum, and to this other spirit, the one who looks after me while I'm here. He doesn't tell me much, like if I ask about the future,

but at least he's there. I can also go there and focus on people, get a feeling of what's going on with them."

"Really?" asked Colin. "What's going on with Minister Bright?"

"I should have said, I can do that with people I have a relationship with, who I know. I can't do it if I don't know them or barely know them. It's like, the part of me that's up there can contact the part of them that's up there. Most people just can't contact the part of themselves that's up there."

"What do you mean, part of... no, never mind, we'll be here all night," Dudley said, mostly to himself.

Colin was still interested. "Can you find out what's going on with, say, Harry?"

"Funny that you should pick Harry," said Dudley, grinning.

"I could, but it wouldn't be what he was thinking, it would just be a feeling, an emotional impression. I have gotten images before, if my focus is really good. I don't know if I could do it in a noisy bar, though." She thought for a few seconds, then shrugged. "Well, I'll give it a try. It'll be a challenge. You two have to be quiet. Yes, I know, it's a noisy bar, but I can filter out the other voices more easily if I don't know them than I can if I know them and they're making jokes about me."

"We wouldn't make jokes about you," protested Colin.

"Not with you sitting right here, anyway," added Dudley.

Luna smiled. "That's so considerate. Okay, I'll try now." She closed her eyes, her hands on the table. Dudley and Colin

were silent, though Dudley at one point tried to mouth something to Colin, who silently shushed him.

It took her a few minutes to ignore the noise of the bar, but she was soon in the state she'd practiced so much in Tibet. She focused on Harry, her feelings for him helping to seek him out. She found him... and unknowingly, she let out a small gasp. Her mouth was open slightly in surprise.

"What?" asked Colin.

She opened her eyes, which unusually for her, were troubled. "He's a phoenix right now. And, something's wrong."

"Harry, will you change back already?" said Ginny impatiently. "It's been two minutes since I asked, and I know you can hear me. If this is you just trying to make some point, then it's not very—"

Ginny stopped talking as she heard the popping sounds of two Apparations. Out of the Apparation area stepped Neville and Hermione, with expressions of concern. "Ginny, is he all right?"

"Of course he's all right, he's a phoenix, he just won't come back," said Ginny. "What's going on? Did he ask you two to come here?"

Hermione nodded. "He asked Flora to tell me, he knows you don't know, and he can't tell you. Something is really wrong."

"What?" asked Ginny, already both annoyed and confused, now anxious as well.

Hermione and Neville sat on the sofa as Harry jumped up into Ginny's lap; she absently petted him. "He's been trying to transform back into a human. He can't. He's... stuck, for some reason."

Ginny was dumbstruck. "What?" she asked in disbelief.

"I know, it's strange, but it's true. I've never heard of anything like this before in an Animagus, but I haven't totally researched it. He told Flora to tell me that he tried to transform back as soon as you asked him, and it just didn't work. He sent out... like a distress call to the other phoenixes, wanting to know if they could help, or if he was doing something wrong, but they couldn't tell him anything. Then he asked Flora to tell me to come here, to tell you."

Ginny was still flabbergasted. "What, is he going to stay a phoenix for the rest of his life, now?"

"I just don't know," said an unhappy Hermione.

Ginny closed her eyes in frustration. "I don't believe this, I just do not believe this... we have to find out what's going on."

"Ginny... look, I'm sorry, but it could be anything. Maybe it's just temporary. No one has ever become a magical animal before, so we just don't know how this works. The only thing I can think of to do is go to Hogwarts' library and research Animagi, any case where they couldn't transform back. I'll go directly to the library and start researching it."

"I'm going with you," said Ginny urgently. At Hermione's doubtful look, Ginny added, "I know I'm not the best researcher in the world, but I need to do something. Neville, could you stay here and look after James? He's asleep, but I don't want to leave him alone."

"Sure," agreed Neville. "Go on, I'll look in on him every once in a while."

Harry took flight, offering his tail feathers to Ginny and Hermione. "I never thought I'd be using Harry for travel like this," muttered Hermione. "But it is the fastest way, right now." They grabbed his feathers, and were very soon in the Hogwarts library. It was dark, but Harry had placed them right near the stacks containing information about Animagi. "I'm surprised he knew," said Hermione to herself. She and Ginny used their wands as flashlights, and started looking; Hermione pulled down six books, and they headed for the tables. Ginny Summoned some lamps for light.

"I wish Professor McGonagall were here," said Hermione as she started looking through the first book, and handed one to Ginny. "If anyone would know about this, she would."

Harry disappeared, and returned with a surprised Severus Snape. "Would one of you mind telling me what is going on, since he will not?"

"He can't. He's stuck as a phoenix, he can't change back. I assume he brought you here hoping you could help. We're trying to figure out what happened, how to get him back," explained Hermione.

Snape raised an eyebrow and glanced down at Harry, who was perched on the back of a chair near Snape. "Trapped as a phoenix, how terrible for you. Are you sure he truly cannot return, that this is not an excuse to—aaaahh!" He shouted in pain and jumped back as Harry poked him in the arm with his long, sharp beak. He pointed at Harry. "Don't do that again," he warned.

Ginny glared at Snape. "I think he was saying that now isn't the time for jokes at his expense, and I agree. If you don't

want to help us, he'll take you back."

Snape sighed. "Very well. I assume, Professor Granger, that you have already considered the possibility that this is unknowable, due to the uniqueness of his situation." She nodded. "If we set that aside, there is only one possibility that I know of. There is a very rare and old potion which, when given to an Animagus, can cause this effect. It has been very rarely used, in part because there are so few Animagi and in part because its use is considered murder, legally speaking. The last time it was known to have been used was over two hundred years ago, and there is no known counter-agent. It is difficult to believe that this potion was used in this situation, however."

"Because getting Harry to take it would be really difficult," supplied Ginny.

"Indeed," agreed Snape. "Though it would not be strictly necessary for him to ingest it. It can be made in such a way that mere contact with the skin would be enough, but even then, it is difficult to imagine that it could be accomplished." He turned to Harry. "Has anything happened in the past two weeks which would fit this theory?"

Harry shook his phoenix head back and forth slowly. "I didn't think so," admitted Snape. "Again, this may not necessarily be the culprit; it could be temporary, or something to do with his being a phoenix. But this could be the precursor to a wave of magical crime, or the emergence of a new wave of Dark magic about to burst forth."

Hermione slowly nodded. "You mean, if some group wanted to carry out some attacks, things like that, they would first want to get rid of Harry, since he could stop them better

than anyone could. If we start seeing killings, or disappearances..."

Snape nodded his agreement. "Like the ones in America. This is all speculation, but it fits, so far. If this happens, it will be strongly suggestive of an attack on Professor Potter rather than an unfortunate coincidence. I will talk to Mr. Shacklebolt tomorrow, and get his thoughts."

"Never mind all that, what can be done for Harry?" asked Ginny anxiously.

"He is not exactly suffering, but I take your meaning," acknowledged Snape. "For now, nothing. He may suddenly develop the ability to return to human form at any time; doing anything would be very premature. I know that is not the answer you want to hear. But even if we wanted to do something, there is nothing to be done."

Ginny sighed deeply in frustration. "Can you develop a counter-potion, if it is this thing?"

Snape shook his head. "Even if I could, it probably would not work. Phoenixes are very resistant to magic of all kinds, probably including potions."

"But a potion may be what got him into this!"

"Yes, but if so, that was a potion he received as a human, where he is susceptible to potions. I will look into it promptly, but I am pessimistic that such a thing could be successful. Furthermore, anything I develop would necessarily be untested, and its effect on a phoenix would be totally unknowable."

Ginny put her head into her hands, apparently trying not to cry. Hermione put a hand on Ginny's shoulder. "We'll figure it

out, Ginny," she said. "This is Harry, after all. You can bet that no effort will be spared to figure this out and deal with it. He'll be back. It just may take some time." Ginny nodded, hoping rather than believing that Hermione was right.

"Ginny, why don't you go home, Neville will stay with you. Professor Snape will help me here. It's going to be hard for you to concentrate anyway."

Ginny reluctantly agreed, and Harry took her back to their home. "We're not going to find anything useful here, are we," Hermione said to Snape.

"Probably not," agreed Snape. "It is a worthwhile use of time, however. We must become as well versed in the nuances of Animagi as possible, even though his being a phoenix goes well outside of most of what is known about them. The more I think about this, the more convinced I am that this was an action taken against Professor Potter. I do not think it was a coincidence that the headmistress died so very recently. If I were a criminal who was planning to take this action against Professor Potter, it would make sense to remove the person who could best help restore him. My suspicion that her death was not natural is becoming stronger."

"There's not much we can do about that," said Hermione.

Yes, there is, thought Snape. "No, there is not," he agreed. They continued their research in silence.

Harry stayed with Ginny for the rest of the evening. She had a difficult time falling asleep, but he sang to her, and she finally fell asleep two hours later than usual. When she finally fell asleep, he took flight and teleported into the night air. He soared through the air, his mind preoccupied.

He had poked Snape partly because it was an unkind comment and one that Ginny didn't need to hear, but also

because there was a small amount of truth to it. Not that he really could transform back, but that his situation was not unpleasant. He felt pangs of guilt, as though his wanting to spend as much time as possible as a phoenix had caused this, even though he knew better. But Albus used to say that we create our own reality, to a great extent, he thought. Did I create this somehow? Did I somehow take myself away from Ginny because I preferred being a phoenix, and was tired of how she was being lately?

He got impressions, feelings, though he didn't know where they came from. There is no point to guilt, they said. Your love for Ginny has not changed. Anyone would be entranced by becoming a phoenix, and most would delve into the experience. You have responsibilities which make that difficult. If you feel that what you have done is wrong, you can make new choices.

He wondered where the impressions had come from, if another phoenix had been talking to him. Suddenly another phoenix was flying next to him; he recognized it as the one that had joined him over the Himalayas. That was not a phoenix, the other one sent. Come with me to the gathering place, and I will explain. He disappeared, Harry following in a second.

They set down on the ground, near the stream. Harry and the other phoenix sipped from the water. There is another way we can communicate, the other sent. Reach out to the Source, but focus on your human personality. The Source was the word Harry had assigned to the phoenixes' way of referring to the spiritual realm, because the impressions they sent felt like the idea of 'the place from which all originates.' Focus on the Source, the phoenix sent, imagine you are talking to me as if you were a human.

Will that help me become human again? he asked.

That is not its purpose. It will help us communicate better.

Harry sent his acknowledgment, and did as he was asked. The spiritual realm seemed very close and easy to access, as was always the case when he was a phoenix. He could feel himself there, feel it all around him. Nothing but peace and love. Then, to his surprise, he saw a face, a human face. It was very old; he recognized it as Asian. To his further surprise, he heard the man speak, in words.

"This is my human appearance," the man said. "I am, as you are, a phoenix Animagus. I have discovered, as you have, that magic is a bridge between humans and the spiritual realm. We use magic to do in the physical plane what we do effortlessly in the spiritual realm: exercise our creativity. Understanding what we do, it becomes very natural for us to take this form when we become an animal."

Harry felt he should be astonished, but the way the man put it, it made sense. "Are you and I the only two?"

"For now, yes," the man said. "The spiritual realm is where that impression you received was from. Specifically, from your 'higher self.' As a phoenix, it is much easier to be in contact with your spiritually based elements. You simply did not know where the information was coming from."

"So, I was sort of talking to myself. That's where my 'phoenix intuition' comes from?"

"Yes, but 'phoenix intuition' comes from the same place as normal human intuition; it is simply easier to access when one is a phoenix."

"Why is it that we don't know the reason for things? I spent most of the evening with Ginny; she was really upset, frustrated, and a little angry. I wanted to bond with her, I wanted to be able to make her feel better. But my intuition said that I shouldn't do it, and it didn't say why. Why doesn't it tell us why?"

"Our higher selves do not give us specific information regarding physical existence which we could not discover with our standard senses," the old man explained. "If we could simply know any information we wanted to know, life would be very different, and not as rewarding. For example, your friends are now searching for a way to restore you to your normal human form. If a solution were to suddenly appear from the spiritual realm, they would have faced no challenge. Solutions to life's problems must come from ourselves, from the physical realm."

"Is there a solution to this problem?"

"I cannot address that. If there is, it will have to come from yourself or your friends. You are still living a human life, so there are things you should not be told."

Harry sighed. "I can understand that. It's a lot like what Albus used to say." He caught a fleeting impression of recognition. "You knew Albus?"

The other nodded. "I taught him. He told you about the time he came to see me."

"Did he know that you could do any magic you wanted? That you were a phoenix?"

The old man shook his head. "On the physical plane, I divulge that information very rarely."

"Have you ever had a burning day?" Harry asked.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you that, either, because it relates to your situation. I understand your reason for asking, however."

Harry sighed internally. He had been hoping that the man might say yes, which would mean that Harry would have one as well. He recalled from *Reborn From the Ashes* that phoenixes tended to have burning days once every fifteen to twenty years, but if he lived as a phoenix for the same amount of time he would have lived as a human, he might not have one for fifty or sixty years. Either was too long; he would not see Ginny as a human again, or at least for too long a time.

"I feel like I wouldn't mind living the rest of my life as a phoenix, if it weren't for the people I'd leave behind, like Ginny," he said. "I couldn't do that to her."

"Disregarding for a moment what your human friends would want, if you could be human again, would you?"

Harry thought. "Yes. I love being a phoenix, but I love Ginny and my friends, too. I don't want to leave them."

"Then it seems to me that you have nothing to feel badly about," observed the First. He realized he was engaging in a mild deception by showing Harry his oldest human appearance rather than his current one, but showing the current one would cause Harry to easily understand that he could have a burning day. Harry would have to discover that on its own, and choose to take whatever risks were involved one way or the other. The First knew that a human life had to have risks, and Harry was still living a human life. The First took human form now and then, but had not truly lived a human life in centuries. Being a phoenix was far preferable.

Hermione and Snape continued their research until two in the morning; neither got more than four hours of sleep that night. Hermione suggested to Snape that he might be a better choice as temporary headmaster until Harry returned, but Snape declined, suggesting that Hermione was better suited, and could handle it. Hermione was on no better than polite terms with Snape for the most part, but she appreciated his confidence.

She used Flora to summon the other teachers for a meeting in the staff room at seven-thirty the next morning, and told the stunned assemblage what had happened. There was discussion about what to tell the students; Hermione decided that they would tell the truth, on the principle that lying was to be avoided whenever possible. They discussed what to do about Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. Today's classes would be canceled, and they would go day by day. Hermione suggested Remus as a temporary replacement; Snape objected on the grounds that though Harry's efforts had somewhat improved the reputation of werewolves, having one around children would be another matter entirely in parents' minds. Hermione was inclined to dismiss Snape's point as a remnant of his grudge against the Marauders until, to her surprise, Dentus said he tended to agree. It would be a political risk, he felt, and she would need all the political help she could get if Harry didn't return soon. Unhappy, she left the matter for further consideration.

Harry then showed up in the staff room, sending impressions to Hermione via Flora. She explained to the other teachers that until a replacement for him was found, he wanted the classes to show up as usual, for what would be a D.A.-style session. He, as a phoenix, would choose a leader by setting on that person's shoulder. For third-years and below, he would find a leader from among the older students who didn't have a class at the time.

His first scheduled class was seventh year Gryffindor/Slytherin. Hermione had addressed the students in the Great Hall ten minutes before eight, and explained how Defense Against the Dark Arts would work. The stunned students took their seats at eight, and were even more surprised to see Harry as a phoenix suddenly appear in mid-flight, Pansy holding his tail. He set her down, then perched on her shoulder.

"Hi, everyone," she said, in her familiar green Healer's robes. "Harry asked me to stop by for a few minutes. I just found out this morning, and I'm probably as surprised at what's happened as you are." Augustina interrupted with a question about Harry's disposition, and a few more followed up as Pansy each time waited for Harry's answer, relayed to her through Red, the phoenix she now companioned.

"Okay, now, as I was saying," she finally said, trying to preempt any more questions. "Harry will be around for a little bit of each class, but not the whole time, since there isn't much he can do. He can give yes or no answers if you ask him questions. If he can't answer with a yes or a no, or he doesn't know, he'll flap his wings a little."

Harry promptly took flight, and landed on Helen's shoulder. She stood and walked to the front of the class, pleased but nervous. "Harry says," explained Pansy, "that he chose Helen because he knows her father's already taught her some of the things he was going to be teaching. But he also says that you," now addressing Helen, "should do whatever you want. If you want to practice things like dueling, that's fine too. Don't just do what you think he would do." Still perched on Helen's shoulder, Harry looked out into the class as he waited for Red to send his impressions and images to Pansy, who had to translate them. Not particularly trying, he saw the students with the phoenix sense that could see a

person's mood and character, which they used in order to choose whom to companion. He was surprised to sense that some of the other seventh year Slytherins were a little resentful at Helen being chosen, though they had expected it.

"Okay, I need to go, I'm supposed to be at St. Mungo's in a few minutes. Nice to see you all again." Harry took her away, then came back to observe the lesson. He thought Helen did a fine job in overcoming her nervousness and starting the class on one of the spells her father had taught her. He observed the Slytherins more closely, and discovered that their resentment was directed equally at Helen and Hedrick. It wasn't strong resentment; they were friends, and the feeling wasn't close to the surface. Harry supposed it was similar to what Ron had felt toward him at times when they were at Hogwarts, that Harry constantly overshadowed him. Harry hadn't known that some of the Slytherins felt that way about Hedrick and Helen, but he supposed it made sense, since they were Head Boy and Girl, and had been a couple since fourth year. He hoped it wouldn't cause any problems, but he didn't sense that it would.

At three o'clock, after his last class of the day, Snape spoke into his pendant. "Shacklebolt."

He waited a minute for the response. "Professor. What can I do for you?"

"We need to talk. How soon can you be at the trees outside the Hogwarts gates?"

A pause. "Fifteen minutes."

"I'll be waiting." Snape tapped the pendant again, closing the connection. Snape knew he needn't tell Kingsley to keep it quiet; requesting a secluded meeting place was enough.

Snape walked out of the castle and through the gates, arriving at the trees in ten minutes. Kingsley arrived a few minutes later. "Professor."

Never one for small talk, Snape got right to the point. "What happened to Potter yesterday has caused me to strongly suspect that the headmistress's death was not a natural one."

"I had the same thought," agreed Kingsley. "Hard to miss, when you think about who might have been able to help Harry. She was the Animagus expert, probably the best in England and the continent. I assume you're offering your services."

Snape nodded. "I believe you have no Legilimens in your Auror ranks."

"Kind of hard to recruit them. Normally, I'd get Harry to do it, if he would..."

"Ironically, her death was less suspicious until he was incapacitated. I will, of course, be looking for a Memory Charm. I will need one of Potter's artifacts to break it without causing harm." Harry's summer project a year ago had been to use his magical ability to create artifacts. It had taken a good deal of study and practice, and help from Kingsley, Snape, McGonagall, and others, but had finally managed a few. The most useful one was able to painlessly break Memory Charms when wielded by a Legilimens. He had made a few copies of it.

"I have one," said Kingsley.

"Why do you have one?" asked a puzzled Snape. "You can't use it."

"There is a Ministry Legilimens," Kingsley reminded Snape. He wasn't referring to Minister Bright, but a Legilimens known to Bright who Bright had used on a few occasions. "Harry wanted me to be able to use it with someone else if I wanted to, but he wanted me to have control over whether and how it was used."

"He didn't give me one," Snape muttered, annoyed.

"He didn't assume you'd be going out on missions," Kingsley reminded Snape.

"Or he doesn't think I should," added Snape. "Well, if he doesn't, too bad. When do we go?"

"I'll try to track down Wyatt. I'll call you when I find him."

"I'll be in Hogsmeade," said Snape, then walked away. He heard the sound of Kingsley Disapparating behind him. Both knew that Snape was going to Hogsmeade so that he would be able to Disapparate away when Kingsley called, which he couldn't do from Hogwarts.

As Snape walked, he reflected that it felt good to be able to do something to get to the bottom of McGonagall's death. He'd had a great deal of respect and affection for her, though he never would have been willing to show it. He knew she knew, though, and that she was as content as he to leave such things unspoken. Harry might have his classes blathering about their feelings to be able to use the Killing Curse shield and other spells he'd discovered, but he preferred people like McGonagall, who valued a certain reserve.

Snape also was pleased to do something to help Harry, which this might; if they could find McGonagall's murderer—that it was murder was becoming certain in Snape's mind—

they might be one step closer to finding out how Harry was put out of action. Despite Snape's professed feeling that personal debts were a quaint notion, he strongly felt one toward Harry, who had released the grip the Cleansing had on him, which had made his life as close to a living hell as he preferred to contemplate. He knew he could never repay Harry, and didn't try. He regretted the joke he'd made that had prompted Harry to poke him in the arm; he knew that he'd been trying too hard to compensate for the concern he'd felt, which he would never verbalize. Harry might have given him back the capacity to have any emotion, but he still wasn't comfortable with some of them.

It hadn't taken Drake, wandering Diagon Alley in disguise, long to start hearing people talking about it. "I heard Harry Potter is stuck as a phoenix!" "He can't become a human again!" "His poor wife!" "Can they reverse it?" "I don't know." "Why can't he do it himself?"

Because phoenixes can't do magic, you nitwits, Drake thought. He savored the moment. "Now, the fun begins," he muttered under his breath. He Disapparated back to America. He would tell Malfoy to commence the first operation.

Snape got the call after an hour of wandering Hogsmeade. Kingsley gave him the location, and they were soon together. "Is he alone?" asked Snape.

Kingsley nodded. "His wife's out, which is inconvenient; she could come back at any time. We'll have to take him to the bedroom."

"He is a fairly prominent person," remarked Snape. "I assume you plan to be subtle."

"Oh, yes," Kingsley replied with a small smile.

It was a small but nice-looking house, with a small garden in the front yard, surrounded by a small fence to keep away children and dogs. Kingsley and Snape approached the front door, Kingsley looking at a monitoring device. "He's in the dining room, he won't see us come in." Kingsley cast spells on the door to cause it to make no noise; he could blast it in with a Reductor Curse and no one would hear it. He tried the door, and to his surprise, it was unlocked. He exchanged a glance with Snape, and opened it.

They entered the living room; Kingsley motioned to the left, indicating where Wyatt was. Kingsley took one more look at his monitoring device to get Wyatt's location, then reached around the doorframe with his wand and shot off a Stunning Spell. Wyatt slumped forward in his chair, onto the desk.

"Very subtle," said Snape dryly.

"I thought so," agreed Kingsley. "The important point is that he never saw us." Snape understood what Kingsley meant; even if you planned to give someone a Memory Charm, you still tried to make sure the memory wasn't damaging. You always had to assume the Memory Charm could be found and broken, as they were about to do.

Kingsley levitated him to the bedroom and laid him out on the bed. Snape cast Legilimens, found the Memory Charm, and activated Harry's artifact. Snape knew better than to hope that someone had carelessly left behind an incriminating memory, however, and he was right. Discouraged, he put down his wand.

"He was attacked, and the memory he had wasn't genuine," Snape reported. "He woke up, found her body, and thought he had seen it happen. His apparent attacker was, I believe,

a Ministry worker of middle rank. I strongly suspect that this was not the true attacker, however."

Kingsley nodded. "Took one identity, knocked out Wyatt, took his identity, sat through the meeting, took McGonagall aside, pinched her heart, woke up Wyatt and gave him the false memory. Very tidy. The next thing, of course, is to figure out what was done to Harry. We need to—" He was cut off as his pendant sounded a quiet alarm. "What?"

"Attack in progress at Diagon Alley!" reported an Auror.

Startled, Kingsley glanced at Snape. "Go," said Snape. "I'll finish up."

Kingsley hated to leave an Auror operation in the hands of a non-Auror, but he knew Snape was a professional and could be trusted, or else he wouldn't have taken Snape along in the first place. He nodded and Disapparated.

Lucius Malfoy felt alive, powerful, almost intoxicated. He had killed four times, all wizards, without the ring being yanked from him after each time. He couldn't wait to get it back and kill again.

The ring had become a rumor in the wizarding community almost five years ago, when Harry Potter had talked about its role in Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald. The ring caused a wizard's power to increase for a few days if he killed while wearing it; the wearer actually absorbed some of the victim's life energy. The wearer of the ring could go on a killing rampage, and get stronger and stronger. The catch, however, was that the effect was addictive. Forty-eight hours after one killed, one felt depressed and weak for a few days if one didn't kill again while wearing it.

Potter had talked about it because he thought it had been well and truly disposed of, and that was what Dumbledore had thought as well. What they had not known was that the artifact-maker responsible for its creation had created other artifacts. The most important one, Drake felt, was the one that could summon any of the others created by the same man. Soon after Voldemort was defeated, he found that one, buying it from someone who didn't know exactly what it did. Drake didn't either, but soon found out. When he summoned the ring, it didn't take him long to figure out what it did. He killed once while wearing it, as a test, and thereafter resolved never to do it again. He could not afford to have his judgment become compromised. He knew, however, that it would make an excellent tool, matched with the right person.

A year and a half later, he had the good fortune to run across Lucius Malfoy, courtesy of one of the other artifacts made by the same man, one that caused the wearer to be able to see through Polyjuice Potion. Malfoy had been working with some Dark artifact dealers. Drake managed to get him alone and knock him out. Malfoy was perfect for Drake's purposes: Drake wanted a killing weapon, and Malfoy wanted nothing more than to kill. It had taken Drake longer than usual to break Malfoy, but with the combination of the carrot of killing with the ring, and the stick of the Cruciatus Curse, Drake was able to do it. He had even allowed Malfoy to become addicted to the ring once, just to make sure that Malfoy would still follow his instructions while in the midst of its euphoric effect. Until now, Drake had set the central artifact to call the ring home after every use. Now, things were different. He would call it every once in a while, but he would allow Malfoy to become addicted. Now he wanted a powerful weapon.

Another highly useful aspect of having Malfoy was that he offered the possibility of a kind of psychological warfare, and a bit of misdirection. It was always good to keep the enemy off balance.

Kingsley was stunned. "*The Dark Mark?*"

Justin Finch-Fletchley nodded. "Terry and I got here just in time to see it for ourselves." Justin was one of the five Aurors who referred to themselves as the 'Class of '98' because he, Ron, Neville, Susan Bones, and Terry Boot had all come from the Hogwarts class that graduated in the summer of 1998; it was the most Aurors that had come from any one Hogwarts class in eighty years. The class of '99 had three, and the class of 2000 had two in training.

Kingsley shook his head in amazement. "Just gets stranger and stranger," he muttered. "Okay, you two continue patrolling Diagon Alley until further notice. Steve, Tonks, and Diana will join you. Five others will be sent to Hogsmeade."

"Okay." Uneasily, Justin asked, "Kingsley, do you think there is any chance—"

"No," said Kingsley firmly. "Voldemort is dead, Harry and Hermione saw it with their own eyes. This almost has to be Lucius Malfoy. You know what he looks like, right?"

"We've all seen his picture many times," Justin affirmed. "But I don't suppose we'll be doing any Polyjuice checks, even on suspicious-looking people?" There was a spell that checked for the use of Polyjuice Potion, but its use caused the recipient to feel a small shock. Not debilitating, but the kind of thing that would cause an uprising if done to enough random Diagon Alley shoppers.

"Not for now, no," agreed Kingsley. Kingsley knew that such a thing would only be tolerated after a certain number of people had died. "I'm going back to headquarters. Keep your eyes open."

In less than an hour, he met with other senior Aurors, Snape, Hermione, and Harry, who Hermione warned them would have some difficulty following the conversation if it became too long or difficult due to phoenixes' inability to deal with fact-oriented matters well. Harry and Hermione assured them that Voldemort was dead, and while Snape could not say with any certainty that the culprit was Lucius Malfoy, he was the only logical suspect; Snape thought it was highly likely that other than himself, Malfoy was the only living wizard who could summon the Mark.

"The only conceivable objective is terror," continued Snape. "That was the purpose of the Dark Mark originally, of course, but this is a different kind of terror. Malfoy—let us assume for the moment that it is he—does not so much want *us* to think that Voldemort is back, but he wants the wizarding population to think so. With Professor Potter sidelined, they will be more inclined to think that."

"Do you think he has an organization?" asked Dawlish. "Is he going to style himself the new Dark Lord, who succeeded even where the old one couldn't—getting rid of Harry Potter?"

"That is the question," agreed Snape. "Malfoy is cunning, so if anyone could put Professor Potter out of action, there is no reason it could not be him. It is hard to imagine him doing such a thing by himself, however. I think it likely that he has built some organization. As for his public image, so to speak, the Dark Mark suggests that he wants one of a sort, but I would be surprised in that case that he has not developed

one of his own, not one so associated with his old master. His use of the Dark Mark is not suggestive of a need for ego gratification on Malfoy's part, but rather, terror and subterfuge. It is difficult to develop a firm profile, even if we assume it is he."

"Would you give us a profile of Malfoy's talents?" asked Kingsley.

"His magical power is above-average, but not great; perhaps in the top-twenty percentile. He has good aptitude at all Dark spells, especially the Unforgivables. He is not a Legilimens or an Animagus. He is more skilled than most who had been Cleansed at presenting the appearance of a normal person. His magical knowledge is above average. Some of his fortune survived his service with Voldemort, so he could have used it to help build his own following. It is difficult to see, however, how he could have attracted particularly talented wizards, since he himself is not one. In other words, he is no Voldemort."

"How effectively could he do the Killing Curse silently?" asked Cassandra.

"I believe he always vocalized it," answered Snape. "So, we do not know, but it is a reasonable guess that he vocalized it because he needed to."

"Or, maybe just because he liked to," suggested Hermione.

"Indeed," agreed Snape. "I should also add that we should keep a particular eye on Healer Parkinson. Professor Potter," he added, turning to the phoenix perched on the back of Hermione's chair, "You should let Red know that she may be in unusual danger; he may want to stay closer to her than usual." Harry nodded.

"You're referring to what Voldemort said outside the Ring of Reduction, that he might let Malfoy take Draco's revenge on Pansy," said Hermione, concerned. "How much of this do you think might be revenge for Draco's death? Do you think that's why he went after Harry, since it was Harry that captured him?"

Snape shook his head. "We cannot know, since he had to deal with Professor Potter to do anything in the first place. I would not place revenge high on the list of his motivations, as we can say with reasonable certainty that he did not love his son. Draco was to him more of a protégé, one who failed in his tasks, as he was captured. Lucius would have later learned that his son had been disobeying instructions when he was caught, and felt that to an extent he deserved his fate. Revenge would be more an excuse for violent action than a reason, but Lucius needs neither a reason nor an excuse to commit violence. It is simply prudent to keep a close watch on Healer Parkinson."

"If it is Malfoy, will he continue this?" asked Kingsley, though he was sure he knew the answer.

"Almost certainly," agreed Snape. "The only question is whether he will continue killing in the shadows, or whether he will kill openly in public places, with witnesses."

"We'll continue the Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade patrols, Shield Aurors only," said Kingsley, using the Auror shorthand to refer to the two dozen Aurors who could use the energy of love, and so put up Killing Curse shields. "Cassandra, set up a patrol schedule. Hermione, I'd strongly suggest that you call a Prophet reporter, go to the Ministry and make a public statement affirming that Voldemort is dead. It'd be good to have Harry on your shoulder to emphasize the point, and that he's following the events."

"Okay, I will," she said, none too happy with the idea; while not quite as media-shy as Harry, she had never liked the idea of being a public figure. As a twenty-two year old Hogwarts headmistress, even a temporary one, she definitely was now. "By the way, Harry has an idea. He's suggesting that we recruit people who can use the shields to patrol as well, a few hours each, as volunteers. They'd be anonymous, and could help the security of those places."

Kingsley nodded. "Not a bad idea, though there would still be risks involved. We don't know that someone working with Malfoy doesn't use Legilimency, and their identities could be discovered; they could become targets. If this is done, they should be made very aware of the risks. It should also be very quiet."

Hermione agreed, and the meeting ended soon thereafter. What a time to become the Hogwarts headmistress, she thought. Thank goodness Hogwarts is safe.

Forty-five minutes later, Hermione stood behind a conjured lectern in the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic. Six reporters stood three meters from her, and several dozen interested Ministry employees had gathered to hear what she had to say. Among them were Arthur, Colin, and Dudley. As she set up, she made eye contact with them and gave them a slight nod.

"Thank you for coming," she said to the journalists, most of whom she knew. To the one she didn't, she said, "Excuse me, what's your name and publication, please?"

"Walter Allen, Moon and Stars."

Her eyebrows rose; the main daily American wizarding paper? She held back any comment. "I see, thank you. My reason for coming here today is to comment on the Dark

Mark many wizards saw a few hours ago. I'm sure many people are wondering whether this signifies an action by Voldemort. As one of the last two people to see him alive, and who saw him walk through the Veil of Mystery to his death, I am here to state emphatically that whoever—" She paused as Harry burst into view, flew for a second, and settled on her shoulder to scattered applause from the Ministry employees. "This is Harry, of course, and he's here to lend his voice in support of—"

She cut herself off again as Harry started to sing. He's getting better, she thought. She smiled and decided to wait him out; he sang for less than a minute, then stopped, to stronger applause. She turned her head towards him and said, "When I said 'lend his voice,' I didn't mean it literally, you know." There were scattered chuckles from the Ministry audience. Turning back to her audience, she continued, "He can't exactly speak, but he's here to emphasize that he agrees with what I'm saying. Harry and I watched Voldemort die. We just want to make sure everyone knows that and is confident of it."

A reporter from the Prophet spoke. "Wouldn't it be easier for everyone to be confident of it if Voldemort had been dealt with by the Ministry in an official way, rather than by you and Professor Potter?"

She tried not to appear annoyed at the question. "No. I think even if Voldemort had been killed by the Ministry—and it wouldn't have been a public execution, only a few people would have seen it—people would still be asking the same questions today. They would wonder if the man who was executed had used Polyjuice Potion, if he had bewitched the executioners, and so forth. Voldemort inspired such fear that there would always be questions."

"Who do you think it was?" asked a woman from Witch Weekly.

"I don't know who it was, and I don't want to speculate. All I know for sure is that it wasn't Voldemort."

"Professor Granger," the witch continued, "I've heard that when you were a student at Hogwarts and Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge was the headmistress, you tried at one point to have her killed. Is that true?"

Hermione's mouth fell open in astonishment; she was silent for a few seconds. Finally finding her voice, she responded indignantly, "No, that is not true. Did she tell you that?"

"I'm sorry, Professor, but a reporter can't tell where she gets her information from. Can I rephrase the question, then, and ask if anything you did led to placing Undersecretary Umbridge in mortal danger?"

Hermione took a deep breath. She was upset and annoyed, but she knew she was on very public display, and had to be careful. "I did nothing illegal or immoral. Now, if you'll tell me who told you that and exactly what they said, I'll discuss it with you some other time. Otherwise, I'm not commenting."

Hermione was ready to end the session, but the woman spoke before she could. "Professor, I've also heard that you discovered that Rita Skeeter, the Prophet reporter who was assassinated five years ago, was an Animagus long before it was commonly known and used this information to blackmail her. Is that true, and do you know anything about her death?"

Again, Hermione was astonished, and becoming more agitated. She paused, getting feelings of calm from Flora,

and impressions from Harry. Pleased and surprised at his insight, she answered with more confidence. "Harry tells me... I assume you all know that phoenixes can see a person's character very clearly, and get a sense of their emotional state. Harry just told me that even before we started, that you had a sense of anticipation, that you just wanted to ambush me with these rumors. You have no idea whether or not they're true, and you don't care. All you care about is that it might be a good story, and it might help your career.

"Now, Miss... Helena Rostoy, isn't it? Miss Rostoy, do you even know the person who told you these things?" There was total silence; the reporter nervously glanced around. "Harry tells me that you don't. I'd also bet you were told these things very recently. Now, consider this, Miss Rostoy, and everyone here. My purpose here is to assure people that Voldemort is dead and has nothing to do with these attacks. If Miss Rostoy had her way, the headline of tomorrow's story about this would be something like, 'Granger Defends Herself Against Accusations.' It would deflect attention from what I'm trying to get across, which is obviously the intention of whoever talked to you. They don't want people to be reassured that it wasn't Voldemort, because they want people to think it was Voldemort, they want people to panic. You are helping them. Willingly or unwillingly, I can't say," she finished with a glare at the woman.

She paused again to catch her breath. "One more thing, before I go... the rest of you, who I hope are responsible journalists... write about her little sideshow if you must, but please make the main story what I'm talking about. Whoever killed four people today is hoping you won't. Thank you."

As she walked away, she heard applause from many of the Ministry employees, and was heartened. Harry

communicated through Flora that it had never occurred to Rostoy that she was being manipulated. Hermione considered stopping and giving the reporter credit for that much, but she quickly decided not to. God, she thought, I hate the press. She also started considering exactly who knew the information the woman had been told. The list was not long.

Snape was sorting potion ingredients in his dungeon when the door flew open and Hermione walked in. "I swear, I would love to just kick something," she fumed.

"Then you have come to the wrong place," said Snape calmly. "I take it the briefing did not go well."

"You could say that. I went home, hoping Neville could make me feel better, but he wasn't there. I guess all the Aurors are getting extended duty, so I decided to come here."

"I fear I will make a poor substitute," said Snape dryly.

Despite herself, she smiled. "I'm sure that'll make him feel better when I tell him. No, I'm here because I want to know what you think. Take a look at what happened."

Eyebrows high—Hermione had never offered to show him a memory before—he touched his wand, cast Legilimency, and viewed the memory. When he finished, he was even more surprised. "First of all, you handled yourself quite well, given your age and the circumstances."

Hermione didn't appreciate the reference to her age, but decided to let it go. "Thanks. Really, I thought her next question was going to be, 'Is it true that Severus Snape killed Rita Skeeter?'"

"I think it would have been," said Snape seriously, "had you not slapped her down as you did. Whoever knew the other things must have known that as well. I am confident that the information was obtained from someone who did not share it willingly. Even Professor Dentus does not know that I killed Skeeter. The only others are you, Professor Potter, the other four of your group, myself, Mr. Shacklebolt, and Mr. Brantell. It may not be apparent, Professor, but what just happened was a good thing."

Hermione caught on quickly. "They let us know that one of us may be compromised."

"Exactly. Mr. Shacklebolt is a highly unlikely candidate, as am I. We cannot know about Mr. Brantell, who is traveling, but it seems unlikely that he could be easily found. It is still possible. Then there are you and the other four."

"Couldn't it be Professor McGonagall, the information taken just before they killed her?"

Snape rolled his eyes, annoyed at his mental lapse. "Yes, of course. That is it, in all likelihood. In any case, it makes it nearly certain that we are dealing with more than just Malfoy, as he is not a Legilimens. Granted, he could have become one, but it seems unlikely. I believe that in the next few days there will be a Prophet article suggesting my complicity in the murders of Skeeter and Fudge."

"Why should they bother?" asked Hermione. "Bright already gave you a blanket pardon for anything you did, known or unknown, as an agent against Voldemort."

"The purpose, as with the reporter today, would be distraction. Our enemies would like to impugn our character and motives, hoping that we may be more concerned with our public image than taking the fight to them."

"I'm not concerned with my public image right now, that's for sure," grunted Hermione.

"Unfortunately, you have to be. You are the Hogwarts headmistress."

"Don't remind me." She paused, becoming serious.

"Actually, that does remind me... until Harry comes back, I'd like you to be the deputy headmaster."

Again, Snape was surprised. "Not Professor Sprout?"

"She'd be good," admitted Hermione. "But especially with what's going on right now, I'd be more comfortable knowing that Hogwarts is going to be secure."

"You know perfectly well the defenses the founders provided Hogwarts with," pointed out Snape. "Hogwarts would be secure if a house-elf were headmaster."

Hermione smiled at the thought. "Well, I'll head on down to the kitchens, then," she joked. "You know what I mean. Will you do it?"

He shrugged. "I already have experience being a temporary deputy headmaster, so why not. It is, no doubt, the closest I will ever get to the vault in the headmaster's office."

Her eyes went wide, then she recovered. "Of course... you were viewing Albus's memories for many years, you were bound to see that. You don't really care about money, though, do you?"

"No, it was a joke, of course. I barely use my salary as it is. I would suggest, though, that this arrangement not be made public; only the staff should be told. The students and the

public would view it as a suggestion that Professor Potter's condition is irreversible."

"We don't know that it's not," she said sadly.

"He will find a way back," said Snape confidently. "He is Harry Potter, after all."

She smiled again, knowing that he was joking in how he said it, but not in the content of his words. "Yes, I see your point," she agreed.

About four and a half years earlier, Voldemort had launched his last great offensive, an attack on Hogwarts with an army of giants, dementors, and Dark wizards. In the course of the battle, the Dark wizards overflowed Hogwarts at one point, and Harry thought he saw one drop a dozen small items onto the Hogwarts grounds. He was highly preoccupied, however, and after the battle he totally forgot what he had seen.

The items were pyramids, an inch and a half tall. They looked a little like game pieces of some sort, as each had a number of dots etched into each of the pyramid's four sides, but not its base. There were nine pyramids in all, each with a different number of dots from one to nine, and each had the same number of dots on all four of its sides. On one side the dots were red; on the other three, black.

Walking outside the day after the attack to check out the crushed tank still lying near the Quidditch pitch, eight of the ten Slytherin second years—Hedrick and Helen were inside the castle talking—happened upon eight of the pyramids. They picked them up, one each, and wondered what game they were from. They carried them around for a while, then eventually put them in their chests, as a sort of memento of that day. Unbeknownst to them, a Gryffindor second year had found and picked up the ninth, and done the same. By

the seventh year, all still had them, but had almost forgotten about them. They were just one of those things people became attached to, and didn't get rid of because there was no good reason to do so.

Lucius Malfoy had known about them, and Drake found the information in Malfoy's mind. With Malfoy's help, Drake was eventually able to locate the device that activated the others. With Potter now out of the way, this part of the operation could proceed. Drake had Brenda Apparate to England, get to within a half-mile of Hogwarts, and activate the device. Inside the chests of the sleeping seventh years, the pyramids started to glow faintly. Each one's owner would remember his long-forgotten possession the next morning, and begin carrying it again, unaware of its slow but steady effect on its owner's thinking and behavior.

Slowly waking up the next morning, Ginny reflexively reached over for Harry where he usually slept. Her half-conscious annoyance with herself for forgetting woke her up the rest of the way. She looked around the room; no phoenix-Harry. Phoenix-Harry wasn't as good as real Harry, but right now, she would take it. He'd been around for a few hours the night before, shortly before she went to sleep. He'd sung her to sleep again; she wondered if she would soon be unable to sleep without it, since she couldn't have him in the bed. It was the first time since they'd been married—the day after she took her last N.E.W.T. exam—that she'd slept without him next to her.

She got up, asked Dobby to look after James, trudged to the shower, and just stood there letting the water flow over her; she lost track of time. Monday night and yesterday she'd been anxious; now she felt depressed. There was just no way of knowing how long Harry would remain a phoenix. Why doesn't he bond with me, she thought for the twentieth time

since Monday night. Then at least I'd have some connection with him, he could send me some of the peace and calm he gets from the spiritual realm. Maybe it's that damn phoenix intuition telling him not to, who knows why. And I can't ask him why he doesn't, because I'd have to ask through Hermione or Pansy, and that just looks pathetic. Or does he just not bond with me because I'm not suitable to be bonded to a phoenix? Does he not care that I'm his wife, for this kind of thing? What will I do if he bonds with someone else? Stop thinking that, she told herself. It's pointless.

She thought about how Hugo had once used the word 'vivacious' to describe her in an article. I wonder when was the last time I was vivacious, she thought. Definitely before this thing happened with James. I'm too dependent on Harry for my happiness. Look at me, he's gone for a day and I fall apart. Meanwhile, he's a phoenix, he's in paradise by comparison. Why should he miss me, when he's got the spiritual realm shining down on him?

Shaking herself out of her train of thought, she reached for the shampoo and proceeded with her shower. She felt abandoned, and she resented her husband. She knew it wasn't his fault, though she occasionally listened to a small part of her mind that told her that he really could transform back, but was just doing this to take a vacation from her. Especially after yesterday's attacks, she knew it was stupid—not only wouldn't he do that to her, but he wouldn't stand by while people got killed—yet she couldn't stop it from popping into her mind.

Contributing to her state of mind was the fact that she still hadn't come to terms with what she'd found out about their son. She just couldn't accept as fact that Draco Malfoy's personality had nothing to do with her son. She fed, clothed, and took care of him—sometimes passing those duties off to

her mother or Dobby, more than she had before—but found herself looking for Malfoy in James's eyes. Three weeks ago, she had felt deeply connected to her husband and her son. Now, she felt neither.

She would go to the Burrow, as it was better than spending time alone, or alone with her son; looking at him now also made her feel guilty about her treatment of him, which she was sure he'd noticed. Maybe her mother would help her feel better; all her other friends were busy. Pansy was at St. Mungo's, Ron and Neville were pulling long Auror shifts in the wake of the new danger, and Hermione was up to her ears in her new job, her classes, and trying to help find a way to bring Harry back. She couldn't even hang out with Sheila, as there was a practice that day. She'd called the team manager in the fireplace the day before and told him that she wouldn't be with the team until further notice. Part of her thought it would be better to practice, to have something to do, but she was sure she'd be too distracted. I can't even play a game, she thought. She dressed, picked up James, and walked over to the Burrow. She looked straight in front of her, lost in thought, but she wouldn't have noticed the dog watching her from behind the trees even if she'd been looking.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 6: With Harry out of the way, Umbridge strikes hard at Hermione and Hogwarts; Drake initiates a plan designed to take hundreds of Muggle lives; Harry's friends find that one has been compromised by Drake in a particularly damaging way.

From Chapter 6: "Well, there is also the matter of your age. Not meaning to offend, but you are only twenty-two, a very

young age indeed for a headmistress. Granted, Professor Potter was also—"

"Is," Hermione interrupted sternly.

"Of course, I apologize. We all hope for Professor Potter's prompt return. As I was saying, he is clearly a special case, I think we would all agree. We wondered if you had thought, in such a time of crisis as this, of temporarily turning over the reins to someone more... experienced."

6. Chapter 6

Chapter Six

It was a very busy time for Drake, but it was what he had been looking forward to for the past three years. All that time, spent patiently planning, setting things in place that would be used once everything started; it almost took great mental discipline to remember everything he had done, all the preparations he had made. It was a schedule, reminding him of what was next to do, to check on the things that needed checking on, like the events in the Muggle world.

He summoned Hugo. "Your next job is to come with me to Hogsmeade," Drake informed him. "You'll be under the Imperius Curse. We will both be under an Invisibility Cloak; the purpose is to gauge the mood of the inhabitants, see if anything unusual is happening. Malfoy will be standing by. Aurors will be an obvious presence; if we can catch one alone, I will call in Malfoy, who can dispose of him. Eliminating a few Aurors will be very helpful."

"The Aurors will probably be in pairs, and they'll be the ones who can use the Killing Curse shield," pointed out Hugo.

"Malfoy knows other spells than the Killing Curse, and because of the ring, he is very strong right now. I think he could overpower two Aurors if he caught them by surprise. Part of your job will be to confirm that they are surprised."

Hugo nodded. Now that the killing had started in earnest, it was harder than ever for him to face up to his role in what was happening. He was still just an instrument, but he would be helping in the killing and harming of people he respected and cared about. At what point was it the better thing to do

to simply resist full on, and accept the consequences, no matter how horrific? Yes, the Curse will defeat everyone in the end. But can I live with myself if I, not under the Imperius Curse, give him information that leads to the death of someone who wouldn't have died if I didn't give him the information? Could I live with myself better if I suffered the Curse however many times in order to prevent that? At least then I could say to myself, I'm truly not responsible, since I resisted with every ounce of strength that I had, rather than made a rational decision to succumb to the inevitable, just to save myself pain. How far does my conscience demand that I go? I guess that's an individual decision, not a matter of right or wrong—

Hugo felt memories being viewed; he snapped out of his reverie and looked at Drake, who he realized had seen Hugo thinking and decided to find out what it was. After Drake was finished, he paused, thinking.

"I do understand how you feel," said Drake evenly and reasonably. "I don't have much of a conscience now, but I did at one point. I haven't had this problem before, because I didn't ask Brenda to do anything that could help kill someone until well after she'd been broken in, and as you know, Malfoy has no conscience, so it wasn't an issue for him. Your conscience is so offended by what you are being made to do that it is even willing to consider the Cruciatus Curse as preferable. That would not last long, of course, but then at least your conscience would be satisfied, as you had done your best. It is fascinating how some people react that way when asked to commit acts that may cause harm to come to another, yet on a daily basis do not consider the harm that may come by a lack of action on their part. They don't grasp the concept of collective responsibility.

"For example, the American Muggle government—which as you know, I am of necessity following closely right now—has for some time been using torture, or what amounts to torture, on many of its non-American prisoners. Despite legalistic denials by the government, this is well-known and fairly well-publicized. If you ask the average Muggle if he approves of torture, he will say, of course not. At most, perhaps only if lives are in immediate danger. Yet they are indifferent to the government doing it in their name; so indifferent that the political opposition dares not use it as a political issue, as it has so little resonance with the public. This collective indifference causes more torture; everyone shares responsibility. Another example would be my own situation, which you know well. Collective interest and pressure not to kill those who did not deserve death would have saved my brother and father. Did you, for example, ever consider the question of whether those who Voldemort took from American and Australian wizarding prisons truly deserved to die?"

"I thought about it," said Hugo, wishing he didn't have to discuss it because he knew where Drake was heading. "A Ministry spokesman said that... I forget the phrase he used, that they all had murderous intent, and that they had all joined Voldemort willingly. I assumed that they were going to go over everyone with Legilimency, and weed out any who didn't belong, if there were any."

"And it didn't surprise you that there weren't any?"

"A little, but not much," Hugo admitted. "I suppose it was because he only used fifty or so non-Death Eaters in the broom battle; I assumed that he only used the ones who were with him willingly."

"A reasonable assumption," agreed Drake. "In fact, however, it was because many of those who were broken out managed to escape from Voldemort on the day he was first injured by Potter. My father and brother were not among those, however. Now, you have a greater understanding of such matters than most citizens, and you were still willing to believe the Ministry's reassurances. You wanted the right thing done; you just didn't care enough to make sure, as Potter also did not. Most people didn't even care whether the right thing was done." Drake paused, then added, "I do go on about this, I suppose. Normally I don't have an audience intelligent enough to grasp the issues involved, and who can still think on their own. I suppose my point is that if you want to beat yourself up over your unwilling assistance to me, then you can do so for your willing indifference to the suffering of others.

"However, I will allow you to do neither. Your agonizing over your responsibility, while understandable, is inconsistent with my objectives, so it must stop. You are being given new instructions, so listen carefully. You will no longer contemplate your responsibility for your actions. You will simply accept that you have no control over your actions, and leave it there. You will also not contemplate the reason for this directive. Do you understand?"

Taking a deep breath, Hugo nodded. "Very well," said Drake. "I expect Malfoy back within the half-hour; we will leave shortly after he returns." Drake took a few steps away and picked up some papers. Not having been dismissed, Hugo remained, and took a seat in a chair.

A minute later, Hugo let out a sharp, quick scream, and cowered. Not seeming surprised, Drake turned to him. "This happened with Brenda as well. You have just had a forbidden thought, no doubt the one I just forbade, and you

know it will be found; you experience great anxiety and pain at the very anticipation of the Curse. This is the sort of reaction that helps the conditioning process." Drake was conversational, cold, and clinical.

Hugo's voice was pleading, even though he knew pleading would do no good. "I can't just turn off my conscience!"

Again, the clinical tone. "Yes, you can. It's simply a matter of how many times you have to endure the Curse before you do so. Self-preservation is a very powerful instinct. Anyway... it is too bad Malfoy is not here, I have to do it myself." Drake raised his voice and made eye contact with the terrified Hugo. "You will not contemplate your responsibility for your actions. You will not contemplate the reason for this directive." Drake then Silenced Hugo, and cast the Cruciatus Curse. Hugo screamed and screamed, and managed to wonder if he would ever have a conscience again.

When it finally stopped, Hugo wasn't able to think for a minute. When he could, his first thought was: I'll do whatever I have to do so that doesn't happen again. That can't happen again.

Less than an hour later, Drake Apparated himself and Hugo, now under the Imperius Curse, to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. Malfoy was nearby, having Apparated himself into the branches of a large tree not far away; he would see what was happening as long as Drake and Hugo didn't go behind buildings. He was to Apparate to their location when Drake signaled him. Drake and Hugo were under an Invisibility Cloak, but Malfoy had been told their route. Hugo held in his hand a Portkey, a simple metal bar. The Portkey had been made with Hugo already holding it, so it hadn't yet activated; it would for both of them only when Drake grabbed it.

As expected, Aurors were there, in pairs, making their presence known. Drake and Hugo walked slowly, about half normal walking speed. "Some people are concerned, some aren't thinking about it," reported Hugo.

A few minutes later, Hugo whispered, "See that young woman up there, in the pink dress. That's Lavender Brown, a classmate of Harry's. She looks casual, but she's not just strolling. She's looking around. It's not hard to see that her purpose is to contribute a Killing Curse shield if something happens."

Drake nodded. It would be good to get one or two of them, he thought, and easier than getting Aurors. But, one thing at a time.

They walked down the main street, then down a side street that had some residences. The fifth house on the left was a large white one, with the sound of loud conversations coming through the open window. "That one," whispered Drake, gesturing. "Is anyone in there nervous, or on guard?"

"No, they're just having a good time," replied Hugo.

Drake spoke into his bracelet, telling Malfoy to be ready. He walked up the path and gently tried the front door, but it was locked and bolted. Drake Apparated himself and Hugo inside, to an upstairs room so the Apparation sound wouldn't be heard, and approached the living room. There were seven people: four men and three women. They closed to within three meters, still unseen.

Drake spoke quietly into his bracelet. "Now."

Disguised in Polyjuice Potion as a young, dark-haired man, Malfoy suddenly appeared. Drake immediately cast a wide-field Silencing spell; it wasn't strong enough to silence

everyone, but it muted their screams enough that they wouldn't be heard by neighbors. A few people started running away, Malfoy got them first with silent Killing Curses. Drake Stunned two more who ran. Two drew their wands and tried to Stun Malfoy, whose Protection shield was up; there was no effect. Within seconds, all seven were dead. Malfoy took deep breaths, euphoric. He looked around as if hoping for someone else to kill.

"No one else in the house?" Drake asked Hugo, who shook his head.

Drake turned to Malfoy. "Okay, back to your spot. Be ready." A grinning Malfoy Disapparated as Drake and Hugo left the house.

"Did you feel something?" Neville asked Ron.

They had been patrolling Hogsmeade all morning, and were now in the Three Broomsticks. "No," replied Ron. "You mean Dark magic?"

"Yeah."

"You know I haven't been able to do that yet," Ron pointed out. "How strong was it?"

"I can't tell, I'm not even sure that's what it was," said Neville, slightly uneasy. "My Dark magic sensing isn't exactly consistent. Let's get outside."

On high alert with wands at the ready, they stepped out into the main street, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Neville tapped his pendant. "Kingsley."

"Yes, Neville."

"I thought I felt something, but I'm not sure, and nothing's happening. I thought it might be worth sending Dawlish out." Dawlish was the strongest Auror, and had the best Dark tracking skills.

It might be nothing, thought Kingsley, but when an Auror had a whiff of something, you didn't argue with him. "Got it. He's on his way."

Hugo and Drake continued down the street, but had only traveled thirty more meters when Hugo whispered. "We've been seen. Behind us."

"How?"

"I don't know. He's stalking us, looking causal, gaining." Hugo sensed that the one following them hadn't called for help because he thought he hadn't been seen.

"Malfoy!" Drake whispered. "The one behind us, now!"

They heard the popping sound behind them and turned. Malfoy shot a silent Killing Curse, which the old man barely dodged. He sent three curses and jinxes Malfoy's way in two seconds, but again, they had no effect on Malfoy. Malfoy sent the Killing Curse again, and this time it found its mark. Alastor Moody lay in the street, dead. Malfoy shuddered with pleasure and power, and Summoned Moody's magical eye.

Hubert Dawlish suddenly appeared fifteen feet away, shouting his location into his pendant. Dawlish adopted a dueling posture, but it was no contest. Malfoy started sending Killing Curses, and as the third one found its mark, Ron and Neville Apparated in. Ron put up a shield around Dawlish, but it was too late; he was already crumpling to the ground. Malfoy started to raise his wand at Neville, but a dozen Aurors Apparated in within a second. Malfoy

Disapparated, and Drake whispered urgently to Hugo, "Get a read on them, quickly!" Two seconds later, Drake grabbed the metal bar, and both were gone.

The Aurors stood alertly on the street, wands ready, but there was no sound except the shouts of a few residents who could now see the scene in the street. An Auror checked the bodies of Dawlish and Moody, just to be sure. The seven bodies in the white house wouldn't be found for another half hour.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was beginning to feel the weight of the world on his shoulders. He had borne burdens in the last war, four years ago, but as Voldemort's main target and the one marked by the prophecy, Harry Potter had borne the largest burden of all. It had all been on him. This time, he gets a break, thought Kingsley wryly. Couldn't get involved if he wanted to.

He didn't know that they were in an all-out war yet, but it was beginning to look that way. Three had died in another quiet attack in a small Diagon Alley shop, for a total of twelve deaths that day, and adding to the sense of organization was that similar attacks had killed five American wizards earlier in the day. At least we'll have help from the Americans this time, he thought darkly. Just not help in England.

What had hit hardest, however, was the death of Dawlish. Kingsley and Dawlish were never personal friends—Kingsley wondered if Dawlish in fact had any—but had been co-workers for many years, and the two most senior Aurors for the last seven. Dawlish had also been the strongest and most talented Auror; that he was beaten with such ease and alacrity was very alarming. Also disturbing was that Dawlish's anti-Disapparation field, not to mention Ron's and

Neville's, had been beaten. If this was Malfoy, he had become very much stronger than he had been.

They were fairly sure now that it was Malfoy, however; Neville had cast a Polyjuice Revealing spell on the attacker just as he Disapparated, and thought he saw Malfoy. He wasn't positive—it had only been a tenth of a second, he said—but he was pretty sure. Kingsley had decided to accept it as fact, and announced that the culprit had been identified as Malfoy. At least that would calm down the people who still thought it was Voldemort. He withheld the information that suggested the assailant had displayed unusual strength.

This was by far the hardest part of his job, harder than finding the attacker: dealing with the deaths. An Auror had died, as well as an ex-Auror trying to help out. More might very well die, and he was responsible for them. He remembered vividly how almost five years ago, five Aurors had died in a massive ambush set by Voldemort. Lucius Malfoy didn't seem to have an army at his disposal, but one never knew.

His next duty was also unpleasant, just in a different way. He had to visit Minister Bright and brief him on where things stood. He knew that Bright would be under intense political pressure to bring an end to the current wave of attacks, even though there was nothing Bright himself could do. It was just the way things worked.

"Okay, that's all for today," shouted Hedrick. "Next practice is Sunday, at seven p.m." All eleven fliers headed for the ground, but he tapped Helen on the shoulder and gestured to the stands, indicating he wanted to talk to her privately. They flew to the far end of the stadium, landed on the steps, and sat on a bench.

She smiled at him. "This isn't a great makeout spot."

"Yeah, pretty visible," he agreed, more serious. "Look... did you notice anything strange about this practice? I mean, the way some of the others were acting?"

"I was going to talk to you about it," she said emphatically. "What was with them? And it wasn't just 'some' of the others, it was all of them, the starters anyway." Because all seven starting positions were held by seventh years, four reserves had been recruited to be trained for starting positions next year. "They just had this... attitude. At one point I gave Augustina a look, and she just looked back at me like, 'what?' She's never done that before. I'm going to see if I can get her alone later, talk to her."

"I can't imagine what it is, since it was all five of the others on the team," said Hedrick. "Maybe there was some fight that we missed, some are mad at the others."

"I'm pretty sure we'd have heard about it," said Helen.

They drifted on to other topics, and fifteen minutes later, reluctantly decided to head in ("Professor Granger isn't going to go easier on us with homework just because she's the headmistress now," observed Helen), holding hands until they reached the castle entrance.

"Let's check to see where the others are," said Helen, getting out the map. Trusting Hedrick to make sure no one was watching, she activated it. "That's strange... the other eight are all in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom."

"Well, let's go talk to them," suggested Hedrick. "See what's going on."

A few minutes later, they walked into the classroom to find the other eight sitting at desks in the middle of the room; they stopped talking as soon as Hedrick and Helen walked in. Hedrick thought he saw a few of them put something in their pockets. "Hey, everyone, what's up?"

"Nothing," said Matthew nervously. It seemed to all of them looked to varying degrees as though they weren't happy to be intruded on.

Derek was less reluctant to talk. "We were just wondering what was going on with your map. With our map, really, but you two seem to have commandeered it. Pansy gave it to all of us, not just you two."

Helen's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "You know it's more useful to us as Head Girl and Boy, we talked about this in the summer. None of you cared, I thought."

"That was before you started not telling us stuff," responded Derek. "Apparently something's changed with the map, and you decided we didn't need to know."

"Because it wasn't important," responded an annoyed Hedrick. "And because we didn't need you harassing us."

"Oh, we harass you now, do we?" mocked Derek.

Hedrick rolled his eyes. "Not everyone, just you. You've always got some comment or another. It really wasn't important. But if it'll make you feel better—"

"He'll deign to tell us," muttered Derek.

"—Professor Potter changed the map to warn us if anyone was getting close enough to be able to see us, when we're on patrol."

"Because why patrol when you can be necking," said Derek disdainfully.

"It's just that kind of comment—"

"Derek, are you really upset about this?" asked Helen, cutting Hedrick off. "Do you have some problem with Hedrick, other than this?"

"With both of you," put in Vivian, to Helen's surprise. "You've been acting like you're better than us, like you're special. It's just this attitude. You're Head Boy and Girl, you're Professor Potter's favorites, you—"

"We are not!" shouted Hedrick. Helen gaped.

"A little sensitive about that, are we?" taunted Derek.

"Come on, it's true," added David. "We all know it. That's part of the attitude Derek and Vivian are talking about. You're sort of separating yourselves from the rest of us. You can do that if you want, just don't expect us not to notice."

"Why don't you both just leave," said Derek, hostility not far below the surface. "We didn't invite you. And don't use the map to spy on us anymore, or we'll ask Professor Granger to take it from you. You don't really need it anyway."

"We were not spying—"

"Hedrick, let's go," said Helen quickly. She took his arm and half-pulled him out of the classroom. As they walked toward the Slytherin area, he gave her a questioning look, asking why she'd made him leave. "It would have only made things worse if we'd stayed," she said. "They weren't in any mood to talk, and Derek would have only gotten more argumentative. We should just leave it alone."

"What in the world got into them, anyway? Where did this come from?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't think we'd been acting different, and they seemed happy when we were made Head Boy and Girl. We spend more time together because of that, but that's natural. I..." She trailed off, baffled. They walked more in silence, then she pulled him aside into an empty classroom.

"Look... let's admit, I think we both think that we're Professor Potter's favorites. He's always talked to us more than the others. He doesn't show it, but it's what I've thought. I guess the others think so too."

"Is that our fault?" Hedrick asked defensively, not denying that he felt as she did.

"No, it isn't," agreed Helen. "I don't think so, anyway. The weird thing is that it's all eight of them. We have arguments among the ten of us, obviously, but usually the rest of us don't take sides. Who knows, maybe they were just talking about it, and we interrupted them. But like you said, they were weird at the practice, too... oh, I don't know. Let's just go to the common room and study, see what happens. If they want to talk, they can, but we shouldn't try to talk to them for now. Maybe they just need to work out how they want to deal with us about this." They walked out of the classroom.

"It's not fair," grumped Hedrick.

She took his hand. "I know. But maybe they don't think it's fair that we're Professor Potter's favorites. Let's see how it goes. Whatever you do, don't get into any arguments with them. If they get hostile, just walk away."

"I'll try," sighed Hedrick. He had never been good at walking away from an argument.

Hermione had a very hectic day, and felt at the end of her emotional tether by late evening. Thank God for Flora, she thought; Flora had spent much of the day with her, and she hated to think about how she'd fare without Flora's calming influence. She knew Neville's day had been worse—he'd seen death for the first time in years—and she would try to be as supportive of him as she could. Fortunately he'd be off at six p.m., so they could have dinner together for the first time in four nights. Clearly, neither was going to be in any condition to cook. That was often the case with them, and they were regular users of a wizarding food delivery company that prepared home-cooked meals and delivered them to one's door. It was expensive—five Galleons for two meals—but with two good salaries, she and Neville could afford it without difficulty if they kept other expenses down. More than once she'd thought of asking Harry and Ginny how much free time Dobby had, but couldn't bring herself to do it. She still wanted to see house-elves free, but she realized that her Hogwarts efforts had been clumsy and culturally insensitive. She hoped that the example Harry had set with Dobby would catch on, but so far it hadn't. She supposed Dobby was considered too strange by other house-elves to be any kind of example.

Even so, she reluctantly decided to rely on house-elf labor tonight; she would have Flora bring Neville to her Hogwarts quarters, and ask the house-elves for dinner. It was sometimes hard to resist having someone wait on you when you had the option.

Neville arrived on time, and the house-elves brought the food, again right on time. She was just lifting the first bite to her mouth when the fireplace in her quarters lit up. It was

Helena Rostoy, the reporter from Witch Weekly, asking for a moment of Hermione's time; as politely as she could manage, Hermione said no, and sat back down to dinner. The next morning, she would realize what a mistake she had made.

The time was five a.m., both in real life and in Luna's dream.

The setting was Hogwarts; the time, five years ago, in what had been the worst two days of her life, excluding her mother's death. She had been badly burned in the fire caused by the disruption of magic at Hogwarts at the welcoming feast at the beginning of her sixth year. Due to the impressive efforts of the St. Mungo's Healers, she'd only had to stay there for one night; she had returned to Hogwarts on Tuesday night. Then the very next morning, she'd been dragged out of bed at gunpoint, wandless, and taken to the Quidditch pitch along with all the other students by the very Muggle troops who were supposed to protect them. She had later discovered that the Muggle troops wouldn't have harmed them, but she hadn't known that then. Harry had eventually saved the day by using his new Imperius Charm.

But in this dream, Harry didn't have the Imperius Charm. And the Muggle troops had the mentality of Dark wizards.

They had lined up a row of twenty students, including Luna's Ravenclaw classmates. The head soldier—his name was Ingersoll, she vaguely remembered—took out his gun. It was the same kind of gun that had been used by Goyle in his attempt on Harry's life, and the only Muggle gun she had ever seen. Without a word, Ingersoll opened fire. She heard the loud popping noise, and the student fell over and died as blood poured from the wound. Ingersoll moved on to the next student, and fired. Luna watched in horror as student

after student was methodically killed. She felt the eyes of other students on her, as if accusing her. Why are they looking at me? she thought. I want to help them, but I can't! They must know that!

Ingersoll finally reached the last student of the row, but to Luna's shock, it wasn't a student, but her father. Ingersoll raised his weapon—

With a sound that was a combination of a gasp and a scream, Luna awoke and instantly sat up. It took a few seconds to orient herself as she gasped for breath. It was only a dream, she thought. But she couldn't shake the feeling that it meant something, even if she had no idea what that was. She had learned in Tibet that dreams were sometimes your unconscious, or your higher self, telling you things you didn't know consciously. She wondered if the recent killings had inspired the dream.

Luna got out of bed; she saw through her bedroom window that it was just starting to become light outside. She felt a compulsion to check on her father, and even though she knew it was irrational, she did anyway. She walked quietly to his bedroom, which he usually kept cracked open when he slept. She looked inside, and saw him sitting on the edge of his bed. He looked up at her. "Honey?"

"Daddy," she answered with relief. She'd always called her father 'Daddy,' and she knew she always would. She knew others would think it strange, but she didn't care. She walked to his bed, sat next to him, and hugged him around the chest. He put a reassuring arm around her shoulders, and squeezed. "I had a bad dream," she said, sounding more like a child than a twenty-one-year-old woman. "They were about to kill you, and I couldn't stop them."

He squeezed again. "It's all right," he assured her. "I know you'd always help me."

She nodded into his shoulder. She had friends, but really, her father was all she had. "I would. I love you."

"I love you too, honey," he said, and kissed her cheek. He looked out the window and said, "Well, we're both up. How about we go out and watch the sunrise." She nodded, and they Apparated to the part of the house's roof that was flat, and sat in the lawn chairs he kept there. It was a beautiful sunrise.

Hermione woke up at her normal time, a little after six. Still tired, she got out of bed immediately, as was her habit; she didn't want to lay there and be tempted to fall back asleep, as she knew many people did, especially Ron. She'd gotten enough sleep, at least; she was grateful that Neville hadn't been called for any Auror emergencies. She'd hoped to spend some 'quality time' with him last night—at least, that was what they called it—but they were both too tired. Not wanting to wake Neville, she went to the bathroom for her shower.

After she was finished and dressed, she summoned a house-elf and asked for breakfast. Neville was starting to stir, but as she walked to the bed, there was a knock on the door. Surprised that the food could arrive so fast, she closed the bedroom door and walked towards the door to the quarters, opening it with her wand. "Archibald!" She gestured him in.

"Sorry to come so early, but I know what time you wake up," he said, meeting her near the sofa. Holding up a newspaper, he added, "Since this crisis began, I've been getting the early edition of the Prophet." For an extra fee, the Prophet would send someone to Apparate to one's door with a copy

so it was received as quickly as possible; in Dentus's case, since he lived at Hogwarts, the delivery person Apparated to the front gate with an owl, which then finished the delivery.

"Good idea. But by the look on your face, I don't think it's good news."

He shook his head. "No, it's not." He had the paper folded open to page three; Hermione took it and started reading as Neville walked in from the bedroom, Auror robe on. He exchanged a silent greeting with Dentus, and read over Hermione's shoulder. "Oh, crap," he muttered. "Any article with 'Umbridge' in the headline has to be bad."

It was indeed bad. It was written by the Witch Weekly reporter—why was she writing for the Prophet all of a sudden anyway, wondered Hermione—who'd tried to contact Hermione last night. It was Umbridge's account of the events on the day Sirius had died—an account that was full of distortions and lies. The article described how Umbridge had been deceived by Hermione, who'd led her to the forest to be ambushed and kidnapped by centaurs, until she outwitted them and managed to escape. Hermione was said to have in effect commissioned a murder, which only Umbridge's quick thinking had prevented. Umbridge questioned Hermione's fitness to serve as the Hogwarts headmistress, especially at such a young age and with further unanswered questions about her past.

"Oh, God," muttered Hermione. Neville held her shoulders in reassurance. Finished, she shook her head. "The thing that makes me almost as angry as this pack of lies is that it says that I declined to be interviewed for the article." She explained to Dentus what had happened the night before.

He nodded in sympathy. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but that's a public-figure beginner mistake. I told Harry this a long time ago, but I didn't happen to tell you. You always ask what they're calling about. You never just dismiss them, because then they can say that. It's still unethical—Hugo would never do it—but the Prophet allows it."

Neville tried to reassure her. "This'll never stick," he said confidently. "Too many people were there. Hell, Luna was there, and she's with the Prophet now. She'll write what really happened tomorrow. We'll come charging back, tell them what happened, what she tried to do to Harry. Come to think of it, I'm surprised she risked that."

"She sees an opportunity," said Dentus. "Harry's out of the picture for the time being. With his status, he could slap her down hard. As it is, this may be her best chance to go on the offensive. From what she said, it looks like she's angling to be installed as headmistress again."

Hermione scoffed. "Over my dead body."

"With what's going on," said Dentus somberly, "that may be part of the plan. One headmistress dead, one put out of action..."

"They can't touch me as long as I stay at Hogwarts."

"Then you'd better not leave," said Neville sternly. "Or if you do, take me and Ron with you. I'm serious, and Kingsley will support it."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I know. Don't worry, it's not going to happen. I'm more worried about you."

"I'll be careful too," he promised.

"There's one silver lining, at least," pointed out Dentus. "Notice that this article is on page three. Normally it would be front page, but not with what happened yesterday." Hermione turned to the front page. The main article was about the deaths in Hogsmeade, followed by an analysis piece about the crisis and Malfoy. On the bottom of the front page was an article about the political ramifications of the current crisis, with quotes from Umbridge and fellow Undersecretary Roger Trent, who four and a half years ago had positioned himself to benefit politically if Harry and Hermione failed to survive Voldemort's Ring of Reduction. Hermione gave that article a quick skim.

"He has his nerve, suggesting that somehow he would know how to deal with this, or that Bright's messing up somehow," said Hermione indignantly.

"Very true, of course," agreed Dentus. "But as you know, he's long positioned himself as a populist, with an emphasis on security. Something like this plays into his hands. Bright's position isn't in any danger, mind you, it's just that Trent is scoring some cheap points."

"I especially don't like the suggestion that he'd be handling the Aurors differently," put in Neville. "Ministers don't interfere with how we run our shop. Kingsley said that's a long-established tradition. They can tell us what to do, but not how to do it. He's criticizing Kingsley as much as Bright."

"He probably imagines that he'll make it up to the Aurors if he ever becomes Minister," guessed Dentus. "Anyway, I should go. I just wanted to let you know about this before everyone else does."

"Thanks, Archibald," said Hermione. "See you later."

The house-elves came just as Dentus was leaving. Neville spent breakfast trying to reassure Hermione, with only modest success.

Drake woke early; a few more plans would be set in motion.

He'd had nothing to do with nine-eleven, but he admired its simplicity, and felt it was the kind of thing he'd have done if he'd thought of it. Today's plan was more mundane, and it had been done before, but it too was simple, and time-effective. Drake had a full plate, and he didn't want to spend too much time on any one operation.

As with all the other operations, the research had already been done. It hadn't taken long to find sarin in its liquid form; the U.S. government's highly secret chemical weapons laboratories kept more than enough. Accessing it hadn't been difficult, not for a wizard. Great care had been required, and taken. The government had noticed that it had been taken, but it couldn't explain how; it should have been impossible to do such a thing, and the information had been suppressed.

He applied the Bubble-Head Charm to himself, and went into the sealed room which housed the box containing six thin glass spheres. Each was about five inches in diameter, and each was half-full of liquid sarin. Lastly, his unwilling but unconscious passenger was magically strapped to his back. He Disillusioned himself, mounted his broom, threw on the Invisibility Cloak, and Disapparated.

He appeared in the air, thirty feet above the floor of Grand Central Station. The time, according to the large brass clock at the information center, was eight-ten a.m. He'd initially planned to do it at eleven minutes after nine o'clock a.m.,

but ended up choosing the busiest time instead. Hundreds of commuters swarmed back and forth in the cavernous hall.

He opened the box and lifted the Cloak just enough to set the glass spheres in motion. As he turned on the broom in a circle, the six spheres flew out, one to each of the most frequently used entrances to the hall. It was so noisy that he didn't hear the glass break, and there was no immediate and obvious reaction. In less than a minute, he heard the first screams, and within seconds there was panic, and a predictable stampede. Only then, when it wouldn't be noticed, did he descend to the ground, where he detached the man from his back, letting him slump to the ground. The man's unconsciousness had been caused by a Stunning spell, but his death would be caused by the highly toxic sarin gas. Drake didn't know his name, only that he worked for Iranian intelligence. He wore jeans and a white tank shirt on which was written, in his own blood, 'Death To America.' Drake had done enough research on recent Muggle history to know that the phrase was well known to any American Muggle over the age of thirty, and that while the phrase had caught on in the Middle East, there was one country with which it was particularly associated.

Drake took one last look at the melee, and Disapparated. Very unsubtle, he thought as he dismounted and put the broom away. Of course, that was the point. Only an idiot, he felt, would accept as fact the extremely obvious indications that Iran was responsible. Only one who would act on the surface evidence, not troubling himself to look beneath it, to seek the truth. But that was exactly what had happened to his brother and father, so this was the test he was giving the world. Act thoughtfully and responsibly, and further bloodshed on all sides could be avoided. Act rashly and vengefully, ignoring all evidence that pointed away from those who appeared guilty, and the situation would only

escalate. Punish those who aren't responsible, and you deserve your fate. As the wizarding population of England was learning.

Hermione stormed into the Potions dungeon at a few minutes before noon, as Snape was about to head out. Noting her expression, he said, "I apologize, Professor. I have procured nothing for you to kick."

Normally she would have smiled, but not then. "I got an owl thirty minutes ago, it came right in the middle of class. It said that if I'm still the headmistress of Hogwarts in one week, a Pensieve memory of my meeting with Skeeter at the Burrow would be made available to the Prophet, along with 'proof' that you killed her."

Snape calmly considered it. "Such objective 'proof' does not exist, so I assume that refers to another memory, which as we know is not proof in a legal way. Still, this is great cause for concern. Your professional standing aside, it confirms that someone we trust has been compromised. The only possible sources of that memory are you, myself, Mr. Weasley, Healer Parkinson, and Mr. Brantell. We must check all those people, except of course Mr. Brantell, who is unavailable, as well as your husband and Ginny."

Funny how he uses Ginny's first name, but not Ron's, she thought fleetingly. "How are we going to do that? Except for Ginny, everyone's pretty busy."

Snape responded by tapping his pendant. "Mr. Shacklebolt."

After a few seconds, Kingsley's voice answered. "Yes?"

"There is an urgent matter which requires the attention of Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom. It should not take long. Can they be spared?"

"Okay. I'll tell them to expect Flora." Kingsley signed off, then Snape made a similar call to St. Mungo's. Within two minutes Ron, Neville, Pansy, and Ginny were in attendance. Hermione showed them the letter and explained the situation. "Professor Snape and I think it's probably Hugo they got the information from, but we have to be sure. Will everyone agree to be checked for a Memory Charm?"

The others nodded, except Ron. "By you, not him. No offense," he added to Snape unapologetically. Snape's reaction was a mild smirk.

"Professor Snape and I will check each other first," said Hermione. They did, and found nothing.

"I'll go first," volunteered Ginny. "Is one of you going to be better at this than the other?"

"I would likely be faster," said Snape. Hermione nodded her agreement, and Ginny gestured Snape to go ahead. He cast Legilimens, and searched for less than a half a minute. He put down his wand and shook his head.

Pansy was next; she also gestured for Snape to do it. He did, with the same results. "I guess I'll be next," said Ron reluctantly. Hermione took more than a minute, and her eyes flew open wide. "There's one here." Ron's shoulders slumped in a gesture of frustration, as the others exchanged alarmed glances. "I assume there were no Memory Charms there that you knew of," said Hermione. Ron shook his head. "I didn't think so, I just had to make sure."

"I assume you have one of Professor Potter's artifacts," said Snape to Hermione.

"I had him make my wedding ring into one," she said, holding it up. She turned to Ron, pity in her eyes. "Ready?"

"I'm afraid of what'll be there," admitted Ron. "But yes, I'm ready." Pansy took his hand for a second in a gesture of reassurance.

Hermione raised her wand, entered Ron's mind, and focused on the Memory Charm. It began to dissolve, and she got a rush of images, seeing them quickly, as Ron did; she could remember everything about it. A look of horror came to Ron's face; he cringed and bowed his head, clearly miserable. "Oh, Ron..." said Hermione sympathetically, glancing at Pansy as well.

If Snape noticed Ron's reaction, he gave no indication. "Well?"

Ron glared at Snape. "It's private."

Snape and Hermione exchanged a look. Sadly, Hermione said to Ron, "I'm sorry, Ron, but they have to know."

Ron looked almost panicked. "Not every detail, they don't."

Hermione was even sadder, knowing how hard this would be for Ron. "I'm afraid they do. Any of us could be compromised, and that could cost lives. We have to know how these people work."

Pansy was very anxious, clearly wondering what had happened to Ron, who appeared to be fighting hard just to stand there and not run away. "Not him," he said, gesturing to Snape.

Having viewed Harry's memories five years ago, Snape knew very well how strongly Ron valued his privacy. "Mr. Weasley, I may be of great help in unraveling what is happening, but I must have all the facts. I must understand our enemy's modus operandi intimately. I promise," he added, with a

slight emphasis on the word, "that I will not use the information in any way you would find inappropriate." Snape knew Ron's mistrust of him was only part of the issue, but it was as much as he could say.

Ron sat in a classroom seat, head in his hands. After a minute of silence, he surrendered. "You tell them, Hermione. I don't think I can."

Extremely uncomfortable, she began. "This was a few months ago, when Ron and Pansy were separated. Ron was depressed one night, and went alone to a Muggle bar he'd heard about. He got pretty drunk, and then was approached by a woman, dark hair, maybe mid-twenties, very attractive. She started talking to him, really flirting with him." Hermione noticed the slowly growing look of shock and dismay on Pansy's face, but there was nothing she could do about it. "Without him noticing—he was drunk, and had no idea she was a witch—she cast a mild Confundus Curse on him to distract him, then a strong Suggestion charm. The suggestion was..." Hermione seemed to squirm, then continued. "I think she put something in his drink, too, but I'm not certain. Anyway, she took him to a nearby hotel, reinforced the Suggestion charm in the elevator, and went to her room—"

Pansy had now sat down as well, staring straight ahead, not looking at Ron. "I *really* wish you would stop there, Hermione," she said, clearly distraught.

"I wish I would too. But there's one more thing I need to say. At the... moment, you know, at the end, she did another Suggestion charm. This one was that he should go to the same bar every week at the same time, and sit in the same place. She would come, sit in the next one, do Legilimens, look for anything interesting, then cover it up with a Memory

Charm. For all he knew, he'd been sitting there for the whole time, with nothing happening. She also, of course, gave him a Memory Charm after she was done with him in the hotel room and taken him back to the bar. He thought he'd just gotten really drunk and gone home."

No one spoke for a minute; everyone except Snape was very uncomfortable. "Is this common?" Ginny finally asked. "I've never heard of it."

"It is extremely common, or at least it was, until thirty or forty years ago," replied Snape. "It is usually done by wizards to witches, of course. Long ago, it was regarded as a cautionary tale to witches not to drink with men they did not know well, and any witch it happened to was simply considered not to have used good judgment. Thirty years ago it was criminalized, made legally equivalent to rape, which caused its occurrence to decrease dramatically."

Ginny had another question. "Well, why did she even do that? She could have just raided his memory right in the bar. Why bother to take him back to the room?"

Having read about the Suggestion charm, Hermione knew, but wasn't going to answer the question. She knew Snape would. "The Suggestion charm is at its strongest when applied at the moment of... sexual climax. The suggestion becomes associated with the pleasure of the moment, and is much more likely to be followed. Mr. Weasley was no doubt made to feel as though going to the bar was a custom, one it was important to follow regularly."

"Is that how they got the memory of the Skeeter meeting at the Burrow?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, it seemed that way," said Hermione. "That was one of the memories accessed. Lots of stuff from the Voldemort era,

the Umbridge incident, and some recent stuff too, like the Aurors. She found out about Harry trying to be an Animagus before it happened, that was accessed the day after the night we talked about it."

"Professor," said Snape, "how many times were Mr. Weasley's memories accessed?"

"Six times, I think. Six or seven."

"It is fortunate that we have discovered this," said Snape, "though they will know that we know, when Mr. Weasley stops appearing at the bar in question."

Neville's eyebrows went up. "Would it be worth having him go next Monday, and trying to catch the woman when she tries again?"

"Not impossible, but risky," said Snape. "By threatening Professor Granger with those memories, our enemy has all but informed us that one of us has been compromised. Perhaps they expected us to check at some point anyway. She might not show up, or Mr. Weasley might walk into a trap. I do not think it would be worth the risk."

Pansy was still staring straight ahead; she hadn't looked at Ron since she'd learned what had happened. Ron looked at her nervously. "Pansy, could we go into Professor Snape's office and—"

She turned in his direction, but still didn't meet his eyes. "Not now. Later." Her voice contained frustration and emotional stress, but it wasn't cold; it allowed for the possibility that things might get better. Ron nodded and looked away again.

"You will need to inform Mr. Shacklebolt of this, of course," said Snape, in a tone that, while not far from his usual one, seemed to recognize Ron's emotional state.

"I know. That'll be fun."

"That reminds me, I still need to get checked," said Neville. "Not that I really want to, at this point. Professor Snape, if you would..."

Snape couldn't help raising his eyebrows, but they went down quickly. Neville's reasoning was obvious: if what happened to Ron had happened to him, he didn't want Hermione to see it so directly. Snape cast Legilimens, and soon put his wand down. "Nothing," he said.

Neville exhaled in relief, then nudged Ron. "We should get back."

Ron nodded unenthusiastically. Flora appeared above them; Ron took a last look at Pansy, and they were gone. Pansy went back with Red; Hermione offered to have Flora take Ginny, but she decided to walk to the gate and Apparate. Soon, Hermione and Snape were alone again.

She shook her head sadly. "I don't know which one to feel sorrier for."

Snape had no comment; Hermione knew that he wouldn't tend to comment on emotional matters. "What do you plan to do about the threat?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'll see how it goes. It's good that they have no proof, at least. The worst they can do is give my public image a beating, and right now I'm not all that sure that I care."

"They may be setting you up for something else, however," suggested Snape. He was about to continue speaking when an owl flew into the dungeon and dropped a letter onto the desk in front of Hermione. With a little trepidation, she opened it, and read it quickly. She snorted in disgust.

"The governors," she said angrily. "They want me to meet them at five o'clock today. To explain myself, obviously, but it doesn't use those exact words. They say, 'to discuss and ensure the future security of Hogwarts.' I assume it means that I should tell them why I should be the Hogwarts headmistress. Do you think it's just because of the article this morning, or did they get some note too?"

"It could be either," said Snape. "It is highly likely that they will suggest that you voluntarily turn over the position to a more senior professor, such as Professor Sprout."

"That may not be such a bad idea."

Snape shook his head dismissively. "Such pressure must be resisted. As I said before, the security of Hogwarts is not the true issue; this is simply politics. If you give in easily, abandon your position for no good reason, you reward them for poor behavior and encourage it in the future. Imagine what Harry would have you do."

"It's easy not to think about him, since he's not here. But yes, he wouldn't want me to do that either. It just doesn't help that I didn't expect to have to do this job, and now I have to go and defend my right to do it."

"Fate often directs us in ways we do not expect," mused Snape. "By the way, you must also be prepared for the possibility that they will suggest that Umbridge be put into the position, or that they will demand your removal instead of merely suggesting it."

She nodded. "I'll talk to Archibald before I go, he can give me good political advice. But if they try to put Dolores Umbridge in here, it's time to open that vault."

"No doubt the other professors would heartily agree," said Snape. They left the Potions dungeon for a long-delayed lunch.

"Good afternoon, my fellow Americans.

"Today, for the second time in just over one year, America was attacked. And again it was New York, that great city which symbolizes American freedom, diversity, and entrepreneurial spirit. Six glass vials of sarin gas, one of the deadliest gases known to man, were opened almost simultaneously at six points in Grand Central Station at the busiest time of the morning rush hour. Many innocent people were killed; many more were severely injured. Emergency medical personnel bravely made their way to the scene and rendered life-saving assistance, disregarding their own personal safety. We salute them, and pledge to assist them in any way possible.

"This random and indiscriminate slaughter of peaceful American citizens shows in no uncertain terms the depths of the depravity of our enemies. This act was committed by enemies of peace, enemies of freedom. It is too soon to know yet whether an individual, a group, or a nation was responsible. But today I make you a solemn promise: we will find those responsible, and we will retaliate against them and any who assisted them, as we did after September of last year. We will not negotiate, we will not attempt to address grievances. We will defend ourselves with all the power and might that a great nation can bring to bear. I hope and expect that the world community will join the United States in not only condemning this senseless

atrocities, but in exacting retribution against its perpetrators. Again, we will truly find out who our friends are.

"I would ask you, the American people, to extend your prayers to the families of those who lost their lives today, to those severely injured. I would ask you to honor their sacrifice, and the heroism of those who came to assist. I would ask you to do all you can to support them. But I need not, because I know you will do so whether I ask it or not, as you did last September. Again we have been challenged, and again we must rise to that challenge, to show the world what kind of people we are. I am blessed to lead a country which I can count on to do just that. Thank you.

"May God bless you, and God bless America."

"Dick!" barked the President as the Secretary of Defense walked into the Oval Office soon after the speech; Evans and Rogers were already there. "Who the hell can I bomb?"

Adams didn't miss a beat. "Whoever you want, Mr. President."

The President couldn't bring himself to laugh, though he grunted. "Thank God for black humor. All right, let's talk. Bob. Did Iran do this?"

Rogers fidgeted. "Well, Mr. President, I don't know much more right now than—"

"Don't dance, Bob," interjected the President. "You know what I mean. Does it make any damn sense for Iran to have done this? Do they get anything out of it?"

As soon as he'd heard about the message written in blood, Rogers was sure that the perpetrator was, or was connected to, the man who'd threatened him and his family. This was

why he'd insisted Rogers take a hard line towards Iran. Rogers had to assume this man would hear every word of this conversation, and make good on his threats if disappointed. Rogers did feel that he could give accurate answers on factual matters, at least. "It makes no sense to me, Mr. President, but you have to remember that this is a nation that supports terrorists. It could make sense to them in a way that it doesn't make sense to me. But from where I sit, it only makes sense if they think they can get away with it. They may think that we won't attack them if we can't prove it to the world's satisfaction. If that's the case, then they send us a message—'don't mess with us'—and thumb their nose at the Great Satan again. That's the only thing I can think of."

"Dick?"

Adams paused. "I see what Bob means. If you start from the premise that Iran did it, I can't think of anything else that makes sense. But sir, I'm far from convinced that this was Iran. That guy in the shirt, that was just way too obvious. You don't do that and then deny you did it, which they are. What was the point of the shirt, then?"

"Terror," interjected the Chief of Staff. "That's the point of terrorism, isn't it? Get people constantly looking over their shoulders, especially in New York. If this happens enough times, political support for Middle East activity might dry up. The isolationists pick up ground, and the Arab terrorists get us out of there."

"Do they really think they can get away with it?" asked Adams incredulously. "That guy was a big red flag that said, 'Hey, over here! We did it! Come bomb us!' I find it easy to believe that the people who did this are Arab terrorists who want us to attack Iran to splinter us from the rest of the

world politically. I find it less easy to believe that the Iranian government is willing to risk getting invaded to accomplish that."

"The Taliban was willing to risk it," pointed out Rogers. "Why not Iran?"

"Because the Taliban didn't think we'd invade!" argued Adams. "We did them, and then Iraq! How many of those countries do we have to invade before they get the message that we're serious?"

"However many it takes," said the President quietly.

There was a knock on one of the Oval Office doors, and the National Security Advisor walked in, holding a file which he handed to the President. "The man in the shirt, Mr. President."

The President glanced through the file, then looked at the front page. "Courtesy of Mossad?"

"Yes, sir," said Richardson.

"Thank David for me later," said the President. Looking grim, he addressed the others. "Iranian intelligence. Ten-year man."

Adams shook his head. "They had to know we'd find out who he was. It's too easy. I could buy it if it wasn't for the message in blood."

"You think he did this himself?" asked a surprised Rogers. "A rogue operation? And where did he get the sarin?" The President and Evans, the only two people in the room who knew about the theft of sarin from U.S. chemical stocks, said nothing.

"I'm not saying I can explain it," protested Adams. "I'm just saying it doesn't make sense."

"A lot of things in this world don't make sense, Dick," mused the President. His features were hard; Rogers could tell he'd made up his mind about something. "Okay, this is where I am right now: Iran is guilty until proven innocent. They'd better bust their asses to persuade me, and the American public, that this wasn't what it looked like. The first test of their sincerity is this guy. I expect them to come clean about who he is, and how he got to America, what he was doing. All their information. I'll see a lack of cooperation on their part as evidence of their complicity. I'm going to say it publicly, but Bob, make sure they get the message in private as well. Grudging, limited cooperation isn't good enough. If they don't aggressively cooperate, they'll regret it. The United States of America is pissed off."

God help us all, thought Rogers.

"That was the first statement from the President since the sarin gas attack on Grand Central Station. As you heard, he made no reference to the Arab-looking man with 'Death To America' written in blood on his shirt found at the scene, or to widespread speculation that Iran is behind the attack. Jim, first of all, I'd like to get your reaction to the President's speech. He seemed—"

Dudley pushed the mute button. "I guess that was about what we expected." He, Colin, Arthur, and Luna were gathered around the office's—and the Ministry's—only television. "You think Iran did do it?" he asked Colin.

Colin looked uncertain. "It's certainly been made to look that way. It's hard to know. It's not only Iranians who say 'Death To America.'"

"I really don't like the smell of this," said Arthur.

"Considering what's going on in the wizarding world, that this would happen now seems like an amazing coincidence. Now, coincidences do happen. It just... like I said, smells bad. And the American wizards aren't going to investigate, now that they're losing a few people a day as well. Is there any indication that it's more likely than not that this was done by wizards?"

"Not really, not yet," said Colin. "They know that it was more than just this guy; there were six glasses, dropped at different places. The other ones must have gotten away. I don't know how they got the gas, but I'm not exactly an expert. It's way too early to guess."

"Keep an eye on it," instructed Arthur.

Dudley grunted. "It'll be hard not to, it'll be the only news story for days."

Pansy lay on the beach of the Hawaiian island that she and the others had visited two weeks ago. After finding out what she had in Snape's dungeon, she'd asked for and received the rest of the day off, for personal reasons. It wasn't yet sunrise in Hawaii, but there was a nearly full moon, and more than enough light. It was beautiful in the darkness, just beautiful in a different way. At the same time, the darkness suited her, because she felt dark.

She thought and thought, trying to sort it all out. It was the biggest threat to their relationship yet, even bigger than the separation itself. What made it worse was the ambiguity of the situation; she wasn't totally sure that Ron had even done anything wrong. Not only was he under substantial outside influence, but they were separated at the time, the status of

their relationship uncertain. If there were ever circumstances that could justify or excuse what Ron had done, it was these.

But she knew that a Suggestion charm was not the same as coercion; it had to be something the person might have done anyway, or at least be inclined to do. If the woman had been unattractive or old, Ron wouldn't have done it, she was sure. Was Ron at that point even capable of considering Pansy in the equation, or was his mind too confused and jumbled? A small part of him, at least, had made the choice. Had it been an unconscious desire to punish her for their fight? An indication of a tendency to want to stray that might come out in the future, when she was thirty years older and much less attractive? Or just the effect that a low-cut dress and a nice body were bound to have on any male, especially a drunk one? She knew she would never know, and she knew that probably even Ron didn't know.

Though part of her was angry with Ron, another part felt sorry for him. He may not quite have had sex against his will, but it was the closest thing to it for a man. She was fairly sure—she wanted to be completely sure, but she couldn't—that he wouldn't have done it if he'd been under no outside influences. Given all the facts, she knew rationally that it wasn't fair to blame him, especially considering that he was probably feeling guilty about it right then. She hadn't wanted to talk to him, because she hadn't been ready for it, and she knew what he would say. She was sure it would be truthful. But she couldn't help feeling betrayed, and she didn't think that would go away. She would always wonder if he would stray, and it would torment her at times. It was a wound inflicted on their relationship, one that neither deserved. She imagined losing her temper in a future argument and yelling, 'Why don't you go find another slut to take up with?' He would come back with, 'Maybe you wish Draco was still around, like the good old

days.' They'd had fights, and he'd so far managed to avoid throwing her past friendship with Malfoy at her in anger. Could she do the same, with this? She hated to think of what might happen.

She thought for a while longer, and a solution came to her mind. She wanted a future with Ron, and she didn't want this to be an obstacle. She didn't know if what she wanted was fair to him or not, but she felt that she was more wronged in the situation and therefore should get what she wanted. If he couldn't live with it, well, they would have to deal with it some other way.

She had Red ask Flora if Hermione was busy; he reported back that her last class had just finished and she was in the Transfiguration classroom. In a minute, Pansy was there.

Pansy could see the sorrow in Hermione's eyes. "How are you doing?"

"Not very well. I'm sorry to bother you, I know it isn't the best day for you either."

Hermione shook her head. "I'd rather have my problems than yours. I was thinking about it earlier, and I remembered a Muggle phrase I once heard: 'There but for the grace of God go I.'"

"You mean, you don't know that Neville wouldn't have done the same thing."

"I really hope not. It's just the kind of thing we can't know unless it happens."

"I feel like he wouldn't have done it. He seems like the extremely faithful type," said Pansy. "And thoughts like that just make me feel worse, because of the comparison to Ron. I

don't want to keep having those thoughts all my life, and I'm afraid I will. So, this is what I want to do.

"I want you to do a Memory Charm on me, not to cover this up exactly, but to modify it. I want you to make it so that what I remember is exactly the same thing that happened, except that the woman did the Imperius Curse on him instead of a Suggestion charm. I know that he didn't really consent to what happened, in any way that matters; it's just hard for me to accept it emotionally. Doing this will just bring my emotional reaction into line with what I really think is the case."

Hermione was silent, thinking. "You don't want to do it?" asked Pansy, surprised.

"It's not that... I just feel like I should always hesitate before doing a Memory Charm, it's a big thing. I have this reaction, like suppressing the truth isn't the best way to deal with a problem; it could make it worse in the future. But believe me, the last thing I want to do is judge you, or judge how you deal with this. I know it's terrible."

"I can understand why you'd hesitate," conceded Pansy. "But I've thought about it, and I really want you to do this."

"Okay," agreed Hermione. "But there's another problem. Covering a memory is one thing, but adjusting it in a certain way is really another. I've never tried to do that, and I'm not sure I'd be successful. Doing it wrong could hurt or even destroy your relationship. If you really want to do it, it would be better for you to ask Professor Snape."

Pansy nodded. "Okay, I will." She headed out, then stopped and turned. "One more thing, though. I need you to talk to Ron, and the others; they need to know how I remember this, so they don't give it away. Talk to Ron first, it's very

important. In some ways it's not fair to him. He may feel guilty, and want my forgiveness. After doing this, I won't be able to give it to him. When you tell him this, tell him I want to forgive him, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to. If he doesn't feel guilty about this—"

"He does," Hermione interrupted her. "You weren't looking at him before, but I was. It was all over his face."

"Well, anyway... if he does feel guilty about it, this is how he can make it up to me: by letting me remember it in the way it's least painful for me, and dealing with whatever guilt he has himself. Or you can help him, if he wants it. I don't think this is too much to ask."

"Okay," said Hermione quietly. "I'll do that."

"Thanks," said Pansy.

Hermione told Ron what Pansy had decided, and had just enough time to return and teach her four o'clock fifth-year class. She then had to quickly prepare for her meeting with the governors. Snape had offered to come along; she appreciated the offer, but she felt she had to do it by herself. Snape had then said, "I think there may be another way I can help," but she hadn't heard from him since then, so she assumed that whatever he was thinking of hadn't worked out.

The time it would take to walk to the Hogwarts gate, Apparate to the Ministry Atrium, then take the elevator to the meeting room wouldn't allow her to be on time, so she decided to take Flora to the meeting. It occurred to her that it wouldn't hurt to remind the governors that she was a phoenix companion, which none of them were, and should be taken more seriously than they might be inclined to.

At five o'clock exactly, Flora teleported into the room; Hermione let go of her tail and mentally thanked her. "Good afternoon," she said to the ten men sitting around the long table, five to a side. "I had a four o'clock class, so I had to use Flora."

"It's no problem, of course," said Danus Tobler, the senior governor and the one who, according to McGonagall, tended to do most of the talking in the governors' meetings. "I trust you know everyone here, as we've met at the yearly social functions. Please have a seat."

Hermione mildly resented the offer; it wasn't as if she were their guest. She was on the lookout for indications that they didn't take her seriously. She didn't wait for one of them to start the conversation. "Your owl mentioned the security of Hogwarts," she observed as she sat. "I have to imagine that you know that Hogwarts is every bit as secure as it was when Professor McGonagall was the headmistress."

"We do not doubt that, of course," said Tobler smoothly. "But we have concerns... first of all, let me apologize for the two of us who are absent; they were tied up and could not attend. They wished it known, however, that the other ten of us speak for them as well."

"As I was saying, we have concerns based on the events of the past few days, allegations that have been made against you. We are not offering an opinion or judgment regarding the truth or falsity of those allegations; that is well beyond our knowledge. But the possibility of a Hogwarts headmistress who may be compromised is of great concern to us all. I am sure you can understand that."

She wanted to appear reasonable, so she nodded. "Yes, I can. But I can also assure you that there is simply nothing

for anyone to compromise me with, so you needn't worry about it." She felt that she was treading a fine line with semantics; there were things she could be compromised with, just nothing that could be proved. She felt that should be enough for their purposes.

She felt Flora send her a mental query: Harry was asking Flora to relay Hermione's emotional state to him, and Flora was asking if Hermione minded. Somewhat surprised, she sent that she didn't mind.

"I see," said Tobler, who didn't look entirely convinced. "Well, there is also the matter of your age. Not meaning to offend, but you are only twenty-two, a very young age indeed for a headmistress. Granted, Professor Potter was also—"

"Is," Hermione interrupted sternly.

"Of course, I apologize. We all hope for Professor Potter's prompt return. As I was saying, he is clearly a special case, I think we would all agree. We wondered if you had thought, in such a time of crisis as this, of temporarily turning over the reins to someone more... experienced."

Hermione focused on keeping her composure. "I've been through crises before, Governor," she reminded him. "I have confidence that I can steer Hogwarts through this one."

"Yes, of course," said Tobler. "No one forgets your role in the defeat of Voldemort. But surely you would agree that even the appearance of impropriety could lead to pressure being placed upon you that might affect your judgment—"

"Pressure?" Hermione gaped, and tried to calm herself. "Forgive my bluntness, Governor, but I've been under more pressure in my short life than the ten of you combined. I know what pressure is, and I can handle it."

Tobler paused as the others exchanged glances. "There are other forms of pressure than the one to which you refer. Some truly heroic people might nevertheless behave poorly to protect their reputations. I also suggest that you consider that you are teaching a full schedule of classes, adding to the pressure on you. It has been suggested that someone come in from the outside on a temporary basis, someone with experience. I talked today to Undersecretary Umbridge, and she would be willing to put aside her grievances with you to work together to bring stability to Hogwarts."

Hermione decided to play the card of defiance as a last resort. "Are you aware, Governor, that she attempted to kill Harry seven years ago? She was the one who sent the dementors to attack him at his former Muggle home. That was never made public, because there was no proof. But it's the truth."

"I can see that you believe that," admitted Tobler. "But you must understand our position. You say this, she says that, and so forth. She is an Undersecretary, in a very responsible position; her word must be taken as seriously as yours. You cannot know such a thing firsthand, and your information may be mistaken. You have risked your life in the past; surely you can bring yourself to make peace with someone with whom you have admittedly profound differences. You will remain deputy headmistress, and you can focus on making sure Hogwarts is safe."

Okay, thought Hermione, time to play the vault card.
"Governor, I don't think—"

She stopped speaking as, to her shock, Professor Sprout suddenly appeared, carried by a phoenix... which Hermione saw, to her further shock, was not the phoenix Sprout companioned, but Harry. Harry fluttered down and landed on

the center of the table. He looked at Hermione; she suppressed a smile.

"Excuse me for intruding, gentlemen," said Sprout. "Professor Potter," she gestured to the center of the table, "had a few things that he felt it was important to say, and he is relaying them through the phoenix I companion.

"He wants to be sure that you understand that while he happens to be in phoenix form now, he has every expectation of returning. He would like to say that he wouldn't have chosen Professor Granger as the deputy headmistress unless he had confidence that she could handle any situation that came up, and feels that it's wrong for you to compound the public slander she's suffered by questioning her judgment when she's done nothing to warrant it. He also says... I'm sorry, he's communicating in feelings, and they can be difficult to translate. The best I can do is, 'What you do to her, you do to me.' I think that gets it across fairly well."

There was a silence, then Tobler spoke, a note of uncertainty in his voice. "Yes, I believe it does."

"May I also add personally, while I am here, that Professor Granger has the confidence of the entire teaching staff," said Sprout, surveying the governors as if they were first-year Herbology students who had misbehaved. Harry took off from the table and hovered over Sprout's head; she took hold of his tail feathers, and they disappeared. He returned in a few seconds, flew to the seat at the far end of the table, and perched on the back of the chair.

A few governors cast nervous glances at Harry, then looked back to Tobler. He took a breath before speaking. "No offense was intended, Professor Granger, or to you by implication,

Professor Potter," he added, with a glance at Harry. "We simply wish to act in what we feel is in the best interests of Hogwarts, as is our job. In any case... in view of Professor Potter's strong feelings about this matter, and the testimony of Professor Sprout, we will forego any action for now. But we suggest, Professor Granger, that you take a proactive stand in dealing with such threats to your reputation as occurred today in the Prophet. You are young, so you may not understand that appearance can be as important as reality."

"I talk to Professor Dentus every day," said Hermione calmly. "I understand that very well. I do plan to deal with this, just perhaps not in the way you would have me do." She stood. "Well, we seem to be finished, so I'll be going. Harry, would you give me a lift?" Harry flew over and carried her away.

"I was really trying not to laugh or smile," chuckled Hermione to Neville as they sat down to dinner an hour later; she had told him most of the story while they waited for the house-elves to bring the food. "They were just floored. They couldn't believe that Harry was threatening them like that."

"It sounds great," agreed Neville. "But what was the threat, exactly? What could he do to them, even if he gets back to human form?"

"He could publicly embarrass them, maybe even get them removed," explained Hermione. "By saying what he said, he was telling them to think of the consequences of doing to him what they were doing to me, and there would be a public outcry. He was more or less threatening them with that. Harry sent to me later that he could sense their reactions, and they were all pretty intimidated. I can see why. Harry almost never uses his political muscle like that,

and they know that. They know they'll really get him angry if they go after me again."

"Bet it's the first time anyone's ever been threatened by a phoenix," joked Neville. "So, what made him get involved, anyway? He hasn't been around much lately, even as a phoenix. I guess I assumed he was doing what phoenixes do, which is not get involved in human affairs unless their bondmate asks them to, and he doesn't have one, as a phoenix."

"It was Snape's idea," she said, and smiled at his raised eyebrows. "I was surprised too, he didn't tell me he was going to do that. Apparently he called Harry, you know, with his wand, and explained the situation to him, asking him a few yes-or-no questions to make sure he would do it. Gave Harry a little lecture, telling him he should spend more time around his human friends when they're having problems. He had been spending time around humans, but mainly just Ginny and James."

"That reminds me, is he going to bond with Ginny?" asked Neville. "You know I've spent some time with her, and she won't say it, but I can tell she really wants him to. I think she's hurt that he hasn't."

"He wants to," she said sadly. "He really does. But the phoenix intuition is telling him not to, at least not yet. It kind of annoys him, though apparently when you're a phoenix, it's hard to get really annoyed. Most phoenixes just accept and act on their intuition without even thinking about it; they don't have desires to act opposite what their intuition tells them. Harry does, so he's kind of a unique case among phoenixes. All he knows is that if he bonds with her now, he'll wish he hadn't. He's very sure of that. It's hard for him, because most phoenixes don't have a specific

connection to, or empathy for, any human but the one they're bonded to. Since he does, it's hard for him not to do what he knows she'd want him to do. He knows she's suffering; from that, from his absence, and the fear that he might not make it back as a human."

"And Snape was telling him to get more involved with all of us?"

"Basically to keep an eye on what's going on, and figure out what if anything he can do to help. To not get so absorbed in being a phoenix that he forgets about what he can do for us, even as a phoenix. Harry wasn't following events as such, though he would have responded to any requests we made of him. And Snape was right, in this case. Without Harry, I'd have had to just defy the governors to keep Umbridge out, and that would have been really bad."

"Can you defy them?" wondered Neville. "Wouldn't they just cut off the money?"

"I'm sorry, Neville... but there are things I can't tell you."

His eyebrows went high. "Wow... I bet they're pretty interesting."

"Yes, they are. It's a headmasters-only thing. Anyway, it could be done, but it would have been messy. It's best to avoid it, especially the way things are these days." She paused to take a bite of her food, then continued. "Speaking of things it's best to avoid, I assume Ron told you about Pansy's decision."

Neville winced slightly. "Oh, Hermione, it just killed him. I don't mean her decision exactly, just the whole thing. When you and Snape called us at lunch, Kingsley gave us an hour. After we left, we went out of Diagon Alley and went to one of

those Muggle fast-food restaurants. Ron's kind of taken a liking to one of them. The food isn't healthy, but it's fast and it tastes all right. I think he likes it better than I do. Anyway, today especially, he didn't want to be around anyone who might recognize him."

"Did he talk about it?"

"A little, but not much," said Neville. "I mean, what could he say? He said at one point that he felt as though it was someone else that did it, and I can see what he means. I think he just feels... powerless. Maybe you could even use the word 'violated.' I mean, it's different for men—obviously on some level he consented—but he never made any kind of willful decision to do it. They say men think with their you-know-what's; clearly if you take away their ability to think with their heads, it's definitely true. I felt so bad for him."

"Me too," she agreed. "For both of them, but I know you meant that too. Pansy said that she thought you wouldn't have done it."

He smiled a little. "That was nice of her. Honestly, I don't know. I sure hope not. But my gut feeling is that he's not responsible, which you could probably tell by my asking Snape to do my scan. I was scared that it had happened to me too, and if it could happen to me, I can hardly sit in judgment of him. I'm curious, did you get a sense of how... willful it was, in the memory?"

She paused. "Yes, I did. And I really shouldn't tell you, because of how private a thing it is—"

"I wasn't going to ask you to," he clarified. "Just a yes or a no. If he asks me if you told me, I want to be able to say 'no' and have it be the truth."

"That's very good of you," she said, pleased that he was like that. "I was relieved that Pansy didn't ask me that question. I think I would've lied and said I didn't get a sense of it. For something like that, I wouldn't want to tell her flat-out that it was private and I wouldn't answer her question. I will say, and I didn't say this at the time because it seemed inappropriate, that this woman was pretty busty, with a low-cut dress, and did this thing where she bent over a little a couple of times. It was pretty shameless."

"I guess that was the point," agreed Neville. "There's something about being a man, you just can't not look at that. It'd be a real effort to tear your eyes away."

"Even you?" she teased.

He smiled. "I would do my very best not to look."

She smiled too, but only for a few seconds. "How did he seem after I told him about Pansy's decision? With me, there was almost no reaction, just nodding. I don't know if he thought it was a good thing or a bad thing."

"He didn't talk about that much either, though by that time we were working, not talking so much. I felt like he himself wasn't sure, at least not then. I think he was focusing on the fact that he had to go home tonight and pretend that it was the Imperius Curse. Let me ask you, in her position, would you have done what she did? Had your memory changed to how you wanted it to be?"

"I thought about that, and no, I wouldn't. I don't blame her; I can see why she did that. But I trust you so thoroughly that if that happened, I would be sure it wasn't willful on your part. I just know, I'm certain, that you would never do that. That's not the kind of person you are. Not that it wouldn't be painful, but I think I could accept as fact that it wasn't

willful. I felt kind of sad for her, because it means that she can't find it within herself to be that confident about Ron."

"Do you think it'll mess up their plans to get married?" asked Neville.

"I don't think so," said Hermione. "It may actually wind up being better for their relationship to do it this way. If this would cause their relationship any danger, it would have been from Pansy not trusting Ron; now, that's not an issue. Now, the only issue is if Ron resents Pansy for making him deal with this alone. I don't think that's going to break them up." She took another bite of food, and remembered something she'd forgotten earlier: Hedrick and Helen had, in the middle of her very busy day, come to her and asked Harry to take a phoenix-look at their Slytherin classmates, who were apparently acting strangely. She said she would ask him, but with how hectic the day had been, it had slipped her mind. Probably just some argument they're having, she thought. The issue left her mind again as Neville brought up a new subject.

After singing goodnight to Ginny, Harry was back in the phoenix gathering place. He would soon sleep, though he had discovered that phoenixes didn't need much sleep, about half of what humans needed. He exchanged greetings with the First, who flew over near him.

You seem weary, sent the First.

I spent a lot of time today following human events, Harry sent back. It's tiring, as a phoenix, to try to think like a human.

You do this because of your friends? Why now?

One of them reminded me of my obligation to them. I don't mind doing it, it's just difficult.

You may not be able to do it for long. Our minds are different as phoenixes. You don't believe you should let the human community take care of itself? It manages, without our active intervention.

I'm part of the human community, Harry sent back. I'm not going to tell my friends, sorry, I'm a phoenix now, I can't be bothered. You don't consider yourself part of the human community?

I was, and I still take human form from time to time. But the lifestyle of a phoenix feels more natural.

Harry couldn't argue with that, but he knew that this other human/phoenix had left the human community deliberately; Harry had not. Harry felt that if he managed to outlive everyone he cared about, he would consider choosing to become a full-time phoenix. But he wanted to have a full human life first. He'd just gotten caught up in being a phoenix for a while.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 7: Drake unleashes a highly damaging attack against the English wizarding society, causing panic; Luna makes a discovery she dreads; Ginny feels abandoned by Harry.

From Chapter 7: Ron and Neville were patrolling Hogsmeade, passing by an impromptu speech being given to a small crowd by Roger Trent on what he thought should be done about the crisis. "Bastard," muttered Ron to Neville as they passed, pretending not to listen. "He can't even wait for the

bodies to go cold before he's trying to make hay out of it."
Neville grunted in agreement.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

Drake awoke at five o'clock, even earlier than the day before. Five o'clock on the East coast was ten o'clock in England, and he wanted to get an early start so there would be plenty of time for Prophet articles to be written about the day's events. Today's plan was his most audacious yet. Such a thing had never been attempted, and it was highly unpredictable; it could well fail. Some would probably die if it did, but those lives were of no use to him; he would use the Imperius Curse to gain the cooperation of his assistants. More, of course, would die if it were successful. Malfoy was already 'warming up', which meant that he was in an underdeveloped country, finding some Muggles to kill. Killing Muggles gave him energy and power through his ring, but not nearly as much as killing wizards. Still, they would get him to a point where he would be much stronger than usual; he would then kill more wizards to become even stronger. What he would do today would require great strength. He would kill wizards not in Hogsmeade, which still had Aurors patrolling, but in wizard residences scattered around the country. Here, too, Drake had already done his research, and had dozens of addresses. Some were for ordinary citizens, and some were for more prominent people. Hugo knew English wizarding society well; he knew where the pressure points were.

Harry awoke from his few hours of sleep with a sudden realization of what needed to be done. He sent out a message to Fawkes. How do you go about bonding with a human? Is there something special you need to do?

Fawkes was not in the gathering place, but distance was no hindrance to phoenix communication. You must simply wish to, came back the answer. Focus on the person. Want to help, protect, be a part of the person. Find the connection the person has to the Source, and will yourself to be a part of it. Know that you feel what they feel.

Thank you, Harry sent.

As a phoenix or a human, I care about you, sent Fawkes. You should be aware that what you plan may be dangerous. We never bond with those who are not ready, or who seem unsuitable, as you are planning. I know it is because you care deeply, but the one with whom you would bond is emotionally unstable. You could be mentally harmed, especially while you cannot retreat to human form.

I understand, and I appreciate your concern. But the Source tells me that I must do this.

For another's sake, not your own.

For my own, as well. I would risk much more to help as I can.

We understand. You are only the second human to join us, and the first who still had those he deeply cared about in the human community. Your experience will be unique, and outside normal phoenix experience. We all may learn from it as well. We will help in any way we can.

I know, and I thank you. I will contact you if I think you can help.

Harry took flight, and teleported to his human home.

Arthur walked into the Muggle Liaison office at eleven o'clock, motioning Colin and Dudley to join him as he

walked. They stood and followed him into his office, along with Luna.

"I was just in a meeting with all the other undersecretaries, and Bright," said Arthur. "I'm not supposed to tell you about it, but I don't care. I know all the other undersecretaries do. They're pretty well in a panic; a few of them didn't even want to come until they were reassured that there were five Aurors protecting the room, and they checked everyone for Polyjuice use.

"Umbridge was really agitated, more than I've ever seen. She complained about that article in the Prophet—did you see it?—that gave Hermione's side of the story about when Umbridge was Headmistress." Hermione herself had declined comment, but Luna, Ron, and Ginny had given their accounts of what had happened, including Umbridge's admission that she'd sent the dementors after Harry. "Apparently Dentus spoke to the Prophet publisher on Hermione's behalf, and he agreed to print the article without giving Umbridge a chance to comment, provided Hermione didn't comment herself. She was outraged about that, and she complained about the Hogwarts governors. She thought she had an understanding with them that she'd be made headmistress again, but Harry put his foot down—or his talon, whatever it is—and they backed off. Bright's usually polite to her, but he was very cold today. He told her that she'd better be quiet, or else he'd appoint an inquiry to investigate the charges that you," he gestured to Luna, "and the others made. Trent defended her, and started in on Bright about the security situation. Trent acted like Bright wasn't making sure the Aurors were being used properly; Bright said they were doing the best they could. They bickered about that for a while, and finally each of us got to say our bit. I said I was sure Bright and the Aurors were

doing all they could, and asked them if they'd heard about what happened in America."

"I'm sure they were very concerned," cracked Dudley.

"Pretty much. No one knew—which isn't too surprising, since the Prophet didn't even mention it—and they all more or less acted like it didn't matter. Trent actually said, 'Perhaps you would consider restricting your comments to things that have relevance to the wizarding world.' I was pretty annoyed—he isn't usually quite so directly hostile—so I said, 'Perhaps you would consider avoiding political grandstanding and pretending you understand security better than the Aurors do.' He started in with, 'Just because your son is an Auror...' and Bright broke it up there. He and Umbridge sometimes make these snide cracks about Muggles, and I just ignore it because I don't care, but I was in no mood for it today."

"Lucky for you that you don't have political ambitions," remarked Colin, "or you'd have to be polite to him."

Arthur shrugged lightly. "True, but if I had political ambitions, they wouldn't make so many cracks, either. Since I don't make political deals, but just push whatever way I think is right, they don't feel they have to be polite to me. Most of the others are, of course, if only because they know if I don't like them, Harry won't be inclined to either. It's just Umbridge and Trent because they both know that Harry's never going to like them anyway.

"Well, that was my exciting morning. Tell me what's the latest with the American Muggle situation."

"The Americans aren't getting nearly the public support they got after nine-eleven, to put it mildly," reported Dudley.

"Colin and I talked to Muggles on the street last night,

pretending to be reporters. Notice how hard we're working, getting information on our off hours," he added facetiously.

"Roger Trent appreciates your efforts, at least," said Arthur.

"I can tell. Anyway, a few were sympathetic, but the general feeling was that the Americans brought it on themselves. 'You go poking your nose in a hornet's nest, you're bound to get stung' was what one guy said. A few people said that this was exactly why England shouldn't have gotten involved in the war against Iraq, and they thought Barclay would be dead meat if he went along with America again. He's already in trouble as it is. It looks like America's used up its goodwill. I think the only people who approve of America right now are people like my father. Not because he likes America so much, but he's the 'they should hunt 'em down and kill 'em' type."

"European opinion is pretty much the same, judging from the morning papers," added Colin. "It's mostly speculation about what America might do next. Yesterday America demanded that Iran identify the guy, provide his friends and family for interviews, and generally get to the bottom of his story. Iran didn't respond at first; now this morning they're saying that he was obviously kidnapped and planted at the scene, the whole thing was a frame-up as an excuse for aggression against Iran, and that the Americans could basically go screw themselves. Excuse me," he added to Luna.

She smiled innocently. "I'm twenty-one, Colin. You can use the other word if you want."

"Not in this office, if you wouldn't mind," suggested Arthur dryly. "Has there been any more word on how it was done?"

"Nothing official," said Colin. "But there's been tons of speculation, stuff on TV and internet with people trying to re-create it, with maps and arrows and stuff. They've decided there's no way it could have only been the one guy, because the glass was broken in six locations, and for that to happen he would have had to throw six sealed glass containers, one right after the other. After nine-eleven, Americans are pretty security-conscious. A guy wearing 'Death To America' in blood on his shirt, throwing glass containers... I think he'd have been seen and stopped. So, they're assuming there were at least a few others. But there's just no way to know, it's still too early. Apparently no one at the scene who survived saw anyone running the other way."

Arthur nodded. "Okay, thanks." Colin, Dudley, and Luna went back to the main office. "Coming to lunch with us today?" Colin asked Luna.

"No, thanks. I'm meeting my father, we're having lunch at the Diagon Deli. Maybe I can interest him in a story about wizards being responsible for what happened in America."

Colin gave her a wan smile. "Why not. At least then wizards would know what happened." Then again, maybe not, he thought as he turned back to his computer. If they read it in that magazine, they'd think it was just made-up.

The six men Apparated into the lounge to relax after two hours of hard work. "So, where they takin' this one?" asked one to no one in particular.

"Be slaughtered, I think," said another. "She's gettin' a little long in the tooth, they think this is her last batch of eggs. Too bad only one out of every four or five makes it."

"S'what happens when kids fight," joked a third. "Guess they want to get their money out of her before she gets too old. How much they get for one, all the bits?"

"Something ridiculous, I think it's near a million Galleons. They use every little bit for something or other."

"Every bit, you said?"

The first man chuckled. "Yeah, the Chinese like the weird bits. Use 'em for potions. Apparently people'll take anything if some of it came from—"

All six suddenly went unconscious under Lucius Malfoy's area-effect Stunning spell. Usually the area-effect spell wasn't used, because even powerful wizards couldn't do more than knock a group off balance with it. But Malfoy had already killed ten Muggles and eight wizards in the past four hours, and so was extremely strong at the moment.

Malfoy Enervated each one in turn, and Drake put each under the Imperius Curse. "Follow us out to the field," instructed Drake. "We have a job for you."

Drake led the way; the men followed, one by one, and Malfoy took up the rear. After a few yards, one of the men suddenly reached for his wand and tried to Disapparate; Malfoy stopped him cold with a Full-Body Bind.

Drake stepped up to the immobilized man. "Some people are resistant to the Imperius Curse," he conceded. "He did put down an anti-Disapparation field, as a precaution. You will assist us, or die."

Drake could tell from the man's eyes what his answer would be, but he freed him anyway to allow him to answer. "I will assist you."

"A wise choice," said Drake, with muted sarcasm. "If you make any further attempts to escape, you will get the Cruciatus Curse. Clear?"

"Very clear," the man agreed, fear in his eyes. The men proceeded out to where they had been a minute ago.

Molly walked out of the Apparation area of Harry's home and into the adjacent living room. "Ginny—oh, Harry's here. That's nice, Harry." She bent over to pet him gently.

"Yes, it's a nice change," said Ginny, with mild sarcasm.

Glaring at her daughter, Molly steered her into the kitchen, leaving James with Harry. "What's the matter with you?" demanded Molly. "You know how sensitive phoenixes are to negative feelings and attitudes. Do you want to drive him away?"

"He's only been here an hour or two every day," Ginny retorted. "I *am* his wife. I feel like he's forgetting that."

"We don't know what it's like to be a phoenix," responded her mother. "Maybe he gets bored. He can't talk, he can't read. He probably feels a natural impulse to do whatever it is phoenixes do."

"You mean, live in paradise while I'm here without my husband, and with a son who I'm afraid is going to grow a horn and claws—"

"Don't say that!" said Molly urgently, gripping Ginny's shoulders, then sighing. "I know this is very hard, Ginny. But he's your son. If you love him, he'll turn into the boy and the man you always thought he was going to be. Who he used to be doesn't have to matter. You have to have faith in that."

Ginny looked grim. "Albus said once that love was like faith. If you had it, you didn't need to explain it. Harry and I were newly in love with each other, and it made perfect sense to me. But with James... I'm afraid I've lost that faith. I want to love him, and I know a part of me does... but I can't find that faith that I love him with my heart and soul, like I used to. I feel like I lost it in that Healer's office, when he said, 'I'm hurting Mummy.' I remember so vividly what that was like, lying there in the Chamber, looking up at him, then him doing the Curse... I just couldn't believe that much pain, and that much evil... and to think that my son has that memory, somewhere inside him..." Ginny trailed off and started sobbing. Molly stepped forward and hugged her tightly.

"We can have memories of things we didn't do," said Molly quietly, running a hand over Ginny's head. "Or, memories of things we did, but weren't really responsible for."

Startled, Ginny broke the hug to look at Molly's eyes, which confirmed what Ginny thought. "He told you?"

Molly nodded. "I was a little surprised. I think he needed to talk about it, and he couldn't with Pansy. I think he needed to be told that he shouldn't feel guilty. And I told him that. Yes, I can't know exactly how responsible he was. He can't even really know that. But I think he deserves not to walk around feeling guilty for the rest of his life about something like that. If he asks you, I hope you'll tell him the same thing.

"But I think my point was a good one. It wasn't really him who did that. And James is much farther from Draco Malfoy than Ron is from the person that woman took to the hotel room." Molly looked deeply into Ginny's eyes, willing Ginny to believe her. "You'll find your faith. It's just a bad time right

now, what with all that's happening. It'll come back to you, just in an instant. It'll be like it always was."

Ginny sniffled. "I hope you're right."

"I am right. You'll see. Now, let's go back in there, be with your son and your phoenix husband. I'll ask Dobby to put together some lunch."

Ginny sat next to James on the floor, and smiled; Harry was moving blocks around with his beak, first showing James a blue block, then a white block, clearly encouraging James to turn the block blue. "Blue!" said James, and the block not only turned blue, but a darker blue than it had when he'd done it the first time.

"Wow, that's really great, honey!" Ginny said encouragingly. Harry flapped his wings, causing James to giggle.

Harry then moved a red block in front of James, then another white block. "Red!" shouted James; the block turned a respectable shade of red. Ginny complimented James again, then looked at Harry. "I thought you didn't care if he did this again," she said wryly. Of course, Harry didn't answer. Duh, she thought, I have to ask him yes or no questions.

Before she could, Molly walked in. "Dobby's working on lunch. You know, I just had an idea. Ginny, you could go for a fly. You could be on your broom, and Harry could fly along with you. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yes, it would," agreed Ginny. "How about that, Harry? We could be together, and you would have a chance to fly. What do you think?"

Expecting an affirmative answer, she was stunned when Harry slowly turned his head from side to side. Hurt and

amazed, she managed, "No? Why not?" She looked at her mother, who looked equally surprised. "Harry, dear, is something wrong?" asked Molly.

He shook his head again. A few seconds later, Pansy Apparated in. Stepping into the living room, she said quickly, "They think I'm in the bathroom at St. Mungo's, I can only take a few minutes. Molly, Ginny, can we Apparate over to the Burrow for just a minute? Harry can watch over James."

Ginny and Molly exchanged another very surprised look, and nodded their agreement. In a second, all three were in the living room of the Burrow. "What's going on?" asked Ginny urgently.

"He said that you wanted to fly with him, and leave James with Molly," said Pansy, seemingly trying to hide a sad expression and failing. "He can't. He's... bonding with James. He has to be around James as much as he can."

Ginny was flabbergasted. "He's bonding with a two-year-old?" she asked incredulously. "Why?"

"I know you're not going to like this answer, but—"

"Phoenix intuition," said Ginny abruptly, becoming upset. "He doesn't know."

"That's right. Red tells me that he didn't have to ask Harry, the phoenixes all know this. Red says that Harry wanted to bond with you, but... he just woke up this morning, and knew he had to do this. When phoenixes get intuition like that, they don't argue with it. It's as clear to them as that sofa is to you; ignoring their intuition would be like you deciding there's no sofa there, and walking through where it is. I'm sorry, Ginny... but there's a good reason. We, and he,

will find out what it is at some point. I'm afraid I have to get back now." With a last, sad look at both of them. Pansy Disappeared.

Ginny hadn't consciously realized how important this had become to her. She stared off into space for a minute. Molly stepped forward to hug her again. Ginny burst into tears, sobbing into her mother's shoulder.

The thick, magically enhanced rope had been swung three times around the dragon's neck, and the metal bar—about the size of a cricket bat—attached, again, with magically enhanced adhesive. Other ropes were holding her down, which was a matter of course. She wasn't inclined to fly away anyway, though, as she had eggs to protect.

"The ropes that hold her down won't interfere with this, is that correct?" asked Drake of the one man who'd been unaffected by the Imperius Curse.

"That's right," said the man nervously. "If it doesn't work, it's not because of the ropes."

"Very well," acknowledged Drake. "You two, hold the ropes that move her head, and you two, the tail. Lucius?"

When the dragon was properly restrained, Malfoy advanced to within fifteen feet of it. Pointing his wand at the metal bar, he said, "Portus." The man watching looked doubtful; Drake understood it was because Portkeys were less effective when worn around the neck than when grasped, and a Portkey had to have a lot of energy in it to move something that big. Drake wasn't certain that a super-charged Malfoy could do it, but he thought it was likely.

There was now nothing left to do but try. Drake pointed his wand at the unaffected man. "You will grasp the bar,"

ordered Drake. "I suggest you run up to it to do so."

"You must be kidding," the man shot back.

"The others are restraining her head and tail," pointed out Drake reasonably. "She could break free and move them, but you have an excellent chance of succeeding. I would also point out that when we are finished here, all including you will be killed. If you go, you at least have a chance to get away once you have arrived at your destination. If you refuse, he will kill you, and one of the others will try."

The man closed his eyes and muttered a silent prayer. Coming from the angle he thought least likely to be seen by the dragon, he ran up to her neck. Even though her head was being held down by the others, he would still have to jump to reach the metal bar. He jumped just as she started to turn her head, pulling the two men holding her head back, but the man managed to get a firm grip on the Portkey. The man and the dragon vanished.

Drake didn't exult, but felt satisfied. Malfoy quickly dispatched the rest of the men with Killing Curses, then Disapparated. Drake did as well, back to America.

The dragon suddenly appeared in front of Flourish and Blotts, in Diagon Alley. Twenty feet tall at full extension, twenty-five feet long, the black dragon did nothing for a moment, perhaps surprised by her new environment. The man who'd grabbed the Portkey started to run into Flourish and Blotts to escape, then skidded to a halt and reconsidered, realizing that a bookstore was not the best place to be around an animal capable of breathing long jets of fire. He started to run down the street, but only got a few steps before the dragon whipped her tail around, low to the ground. His legs were crushed by the dragon's heavy and

sharp tail, and he screamed in pain and terror. The dragon roared and let out a jet of flame in the direction of Flourish and Blotts, which promptly ignited, burning furiously after only a few seconds. The dragon then turned her attention to the man on the ground. She reached down and picked him up with razor-sharp teeth, wounding but still not killing him. Just before she shoved him further back into her mouth to be crushed by her jaws, his last terrified thought was that he should have stayed behind and let them kill him.

Lucius Malfoy Apparated into Diagon Alley about fifty feet from where he knew the dragon would appear, and started blanketing the area with anti-Disapparation fields. Even spread over such a wide area, his current power was such that he was sure no one would be able to Apparate in or out. The only exception was the spot on which he was standing; he then Disapparated away.

The dragon shot another tongue of flame down the street; it hit no one, as people were already screaming and running. The dragon broke into a slow trot, following the largest crowd and roaring again as they raced for the wall which led to Muggle London. A few dozen panicked people were huddled against the wall while a man tried to move the bricks in the proper way, but was frequently jostled as he tried, disrupting his concentration. The dragon quickly closed on them, and spat out another burst of fire. Even at a distance of twenty feet, almost all of the people were torched; most died instantly. A few ran away, on fire and screaming; the dragon picked up another victim and consumed him.

At the Ministry, Luna threw Floo powder into the fireplace and said "Diagon Alley," but when she stepped in, nothing happened. She tried a few more times, with the same result. She was surprised; it occasionally happened that more than

one person tried to access the same fireplace at the same time, but normally the Floo system queued them, and the person never noticed that anything was wrong. This only happened when there was heavy use on the other end.

She didn't like to use the Knockturn Alley fireplace, but she didn't want to be too late, so she did. "Knockturn Alley!" she said, and stepped through. The first thing she saw, to her shock, was a crowd of people, maybe fifteen, rushing toward her and knocking her head against the back of the fireplace. She was jostled aside until she was out of the crowd, but there was so much shoving and hectic activity near the fireplace that no one could use it. More people entered the shop and ran to the fireplace.

"What's going on?" she shouted.

"Dragon!" a few people shouted. Luna's first thought was that it was extremely unlikely—'Dragon Roams Diagon Alley' sounded like a headline for an article in her father's magazine—but she could see that these people were genuinely panicked, in fear for their lives. Oh, no, she thought with dread. Daddy... She raced out of the shop and into the street.

"A *what*?" demanded Kingsley.

"A dragon, a black one," Terry Boot repeated. "A dozen stores are on fire, people are panicking, some dead. I have no idea how it got here, but it's on a rampage. No one can Disapparate; I assume a powerful field must be up."

"Malfoy," muttered Kingsley. "What about the fireplaces?"

"Crowds around the main one, but no one can use them because it's a mob. I assume it's the same for the Knockturn Alley one."

"Establish control over the fireplaces, Stun people if you have to," ordered Kingsley. "If we get them clear, help people leave one by one. I'll get help to you as soon as I can."

"Got it," said Terry. Susan Bones ran up to him. "We have to clear the fireplaces. Tonks and I'll do Knockturn Alley."

"Steve and I'll work on the main one," she agreed. They took off running in different directions, dodging people running for their lives.

The dragon took flight, though she didn't go high into the air; seldom did she have so much to feast on in such a small space. She flew halfway across the mini-city and landed on top of a restaurant, crushing it and the twenty-odd people in it. She headed for Knockturn Alley, letting loose several bursts of flame before taking flight again, looking for a more open area. She saw a few dozen people running in one direction, and flew to catch up.

Luna turned a corner and saw that the Diagon Deli was a blazing inferno. "No," she cried. He got out, she thought, there had to be warning. She heard a roar in the distance, and ran towards it. Her mind flashed back to the dream. She had to do whatever it took to save him.

He could be anywhere, but the first place to look was the Diagon Alley fireplace, since he might be trying to escape, or looking for her there. The roaring was coming from the same general area, she knew. As she ran, she also realized that the area was a deathtrap in this particular situation: the fireplace was a dead end to a smaller alley perhaps ten feet wide, but forty feet long. People would never go into a narrow cul-de-sac while trying to run away, unless it offered the only chance of escape. But she knew the situation at

that fireplace was bound to be even worse than the one at Knockturn Alley.

She saw the dragon land at the entrance to the cul-de-sac, causing the people running to the fireplace to reverse direction as quickly as they could. Another burst of flame killed a dozen; the dragon grabbed in her jaws a woman who was on fire and still writhing, and quickly wolfed her down. Luna felt sickened and terrified, but no less determined.

The dragon turned and advanced toward the fireplace, and the crowd of more than fifty people at the end. Trying to be careful not to get in the way of the dragon's tail, Luna ran up behind it to look down the alley to the fireplace. The dragon whisked her tail around in front of her, instantly killing the dozen people closest to her. Luna got enough of a look to see that one of them was Susan Bones, obviously trying to establish order near the fireplace. Then she saw her father, pushed against one of the sides of the alley, trapped but not near the fireplace. He had no chance of escaping.

The dragon reared her head back, and another jet of flame started to leave her mouth—the one that would incinerate everyone near the fireplace, including Luna's father.

Her mother was already gone; she couldn't let her father die. In that instant, in the pressure of the moment, she felt her connection to the spiritual realm more strongly than ever; it was a resource for which she unconsciously reached. It told her what her dream had meant; only now was she willing to listen. Part of her had known before, but she had denied it because of the pain she had seen Harry go through. This was the last thing she wanted; because of it, Harry had had to endure the agony of letting people die that he could have saved, and the First avoided living among humans entirely so he wouldn't have to make such choices. Luna didn't want

the burden, but she would bear it; she would bear anything rather than watch her father die.

The dragon and its jet of flame were suddenly gone.

There was silence, except for the sound of the fires, and a few people in the distance screaming from their burns. Luna was suddenly aware of two things: the disappearance of the dragon had to be explained, and she absolutely did not want anyone to know what she could do. Harry had nearly had to shut himself off from society because of his abilities: his home was hidden, and he usually activated a magical disguise before going out in public. She didn't want that either.

Knowing she could do anything Harry could do, she did the one thing that would give her time to think: she stopped time for everywhere but where she stood. She took a few minutes to come up with something that would explain what had happened, then altered the memory of all the witnesses except her father so they would remember what she wanted them to remember. She then caused the dragon to reappear in its natural habitat—she knew roughly where that was, by the type of dragon—and reluctantly sent the body of Susan Bones there as well. Finally, she started time again.

The crowd gaped at what they thought they had seen, and slowly started to make their way back to Diagon Alley; a few, including an Auror, bent over the bodies of those hit by the dragon's tail to make sure they were dead.

Luna walked to her father and hugged him tightly, as a few tears came to her eyes. You're going to live to a ripe old age, she thought. I promise you that.

After checking the bodies, Steve Janus tapped his pendant. "Kingsley, Steve. The dragon's gone."

"Gone?" repeated Kingsley, again stunned. "How?"

"Susan did it," said Janus, emotion starting to catch up with him. "She and I were trying to clear the fireplace when it cornered us. It was wearing a metal bar around its neck; Susan must have realized it was a Portkey. She ran up to it and jumped, and grabbed the Portkey. She and the dragon disappeared. I hope she's still alive, but..."

"We're getting her location now, and sending a team out to make sure," said Kingsley, though he knew it was probably futile. "Clear all fireplaces for St. Mungo's personnel to use. Is the anti-Disapparation field still going?"

"Yes, but a few Healers are here already. Pansy and a few others came, Red took them. More are arriving."

"Okay, good. They still might want to use the fireplaces to get out, though. Also, go and make sure the gateway to Muggle London is open. The anti-Disapparation field probably doesn't extend past that. The Healers can levitate people that far, and then Disapparate. I'll send Obliviators to the other side just in case any Muggles see them."

"Understood," said Janus. Kingsley sent Aurors to the location of Susan's pendant, then called Arthur to ask him to supervise the Obliviators and steer Muggles away from the area. It had been a busy morning—eight people had been killed in the middle of the night, including four important ones—and it would be a busy afternoon. Kingsley wondered how the people at the Magical Research Institute were doing on finding a way to get Harry back to human form.

An hour after the dragon first appeared in Diagon Alley, Hermione told the other teachers what had happened, but decided not to tell the students yet; no doubt some of them had parents or relatives who were killed, and she didn't want

the students to spend their afternoons wondering whether or not their loved ones were still alive. The students would be told when a list of names was ready; the ones who had lost someone would be told individually before the whole school was told, and would be excused from Hogwarts for the weekend, or however long their guardians saw fit.

Pansy was getting more practice dealing with burns than she ever wanted to have; fortunately, the energy of love worked well in combination with spells and magical lotions, and all the patients she was helping treat were responding well. She was extremely busy, as was everyone at St. Mungo's. Ten people were touch-and-go, and she wished Harry were around as a human to use the Imperius Charm. Then again, she thought, he could have stopped this in the first place.

Ron and Neville were patrolling Hogsmeade, passing by an impromptu speech being given to a small crowd by Roger Trent on what he thought should be done about the crisis. "Bastard," muttered Ron to Neville as they passed, pretending not to listen. "He can't even wait for the bodies to go cold before he's trying to make hay out of it." Neville grunted in agreement.

Kingsley was getting the casualty tally from Healer Haspberg at St. Mungo's. One hundred twelve had died; a few more still might.

Harry knew what had happened, but refused to move from James' side.

Arthur Apparated home briefly after overseeing the Obliviation of the few Muggles who saw Diagon Alley open, and told Molly and Ginny what had happened.

Molly was extremely sad, and thanked whatever powers there were that Fred and George were in America,

negotiating to open a branch of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in the Sixth Borough, or the wizarding section of San Francisco.

Ginny, still upset, nevertheless reflected that there were worse things than not being bonded to one's phoenix/husband.

Hugo, upon being told what had happened and left alone, focused on love; it was the only way he could avoid thinking about his responsibility and his conscience. He did his best to discipline his mind, focus only on that.

Drake, satisfied with the result, went to check Rogers, then prepared for the next day's events. There was still much to do.

Brenda, the collie, had no idea what had happened in Diagon Alley. She continued to loiter around the outskirts of the Burrow and Harry's home.

Luna sat at the kitchen table of their small house, finishing the story for her father. "So, that's what happened," she finished. With a self-deprecating smile, she added, "You're now sitting with the most powerful witch in the world."

He smiled and gripped her hand. "All I care about is that you're the nicest, sweetest witch in the world. And you are."

She smiled broadly, touched by his words. "Thanks, Daddy. I know that's more important anyway. And I'm sorry about not telling anyone. I'm sure you'd love to write about this for the Quibbler."

He chuckled and shook his head. "One thing I never wanted to do was write about my family. So, you're going to tell absolutely no one else?"

"I will tell Harry," she amended. "I'm sure it'll be helpful to talk to him about it, once he gets back to human form. And of course I'll tell my future husband, whoever that might be. But for now, only you and Harry will know."

"Does this mean you can be a phoenix?" he asked, impressed.

"Probably," she agreed. "I don't want to do it just yet, though. I want to get used to this first. It feels strange to suddenly know that I can do almost anything I want."

"Maybe you shouldn't be a phoenix yet," he suggested, suddenly a little worried. "Look what happened to Harry, he can't get back. I don't want that to happen to you, too."

She shook her head. "That wouldn't happen. Look at what happened: Harry got trapped as a phoenix, and the very next day, all this violence starts. It had to be planned. Whoever it was knew Harry could stop them, so they got him out of the way first. That isn't going to happen to me, because they won't know about me."

"You said Harry could stop them," her father pointed out. "That means you could stop them too."

She answered immediately. "No, I'm not going to do that. They will get this guy, these people, on their own. Yes, they could catch them faster with my help. I could save lives. But, Daddy, I could save lives all over the world right now. I know all about this. I've talked to Harry about it, and I've talked to the First about it. I even thought at that time, if I were Harry, I'd only use it to save my immediate family, and that's all. I wouldn't have saved those people in America like he did. I'm not going to go through what he went through. It's not that I don't care; I care a lot. But I can't go around saving everyone, and I don't want to keep having to make the

decision, like Harry does. So, this is my decision. I know it sounds... cold, maybe, but..."

He patted her hand. "You're far from cold, sweetie, I know that. You've had more of a chance to think about this than I have. I wouldn't judge your decision. I understand the spiritual aspects of it, you've explained that to me." He paused. "So, are you going to use it for little conveniences, like Harry does?"

"Probably," she said. "Of course, I have to be careful what I do where anyone can see me. I can't teleport like Harry does if there are people around. But I can think of a few things, and at some point I'll ask Harry what he does. I'm sure that by now he's come up with a lot of things."

"Are you going to keep doing what you've been doing? Working on that article for the Prophet, spending time at the Ministry?"

She nodded. "For now at least, I want to just do the same things I was doing before. I actually think the article is a good thing, not just an exercise to test me like the Prophet has in mind. It would be nice if more people understood what was going on in the Muggle world. A lot of wizards just pretend it doesn't exist, and it seems to me that's a bad idea. So I'm happy to do it."

"That's good, sweetie. I'm glad you're happy with what you're doing. And if you finish, and they don't want to publish what you write..."

She smiled again. "I think I know someone who would."

Ginny lay on a bed in one of the Burrow bedrooms, the one Ron and Pansy weren't living in. She'd told her mother she needed to lie down, but what she really needed was time

alone to work out her feelings. She didn't want to go back home until she felt better, or at least, wasn't such an obvious mental wreck.

She was fighting against her feelings, and she was sick of it. It seemed like she'd been doing it for weeks, since they'd found out about James; she wanted to be as sanguine as Harry about it, but she couldn't. When Harry had become a phoenix, she'd wanted to be happy for him, but soon resented the time it took him away from her. When he'd become trapped as a phoenix, she at first fought the feeling that he really could come back but was just choosing not to, then later, the idea that he preferred being a phoenix and wasn't unhappy with the change. Now, she fought the feeling that Harry had chosen to bond with James rather than her out of some sort of preference. She knew it wasn't true; Pansy had said as much. She told Ginny that Harry wanted to bond with her. It was as if she just couldn't accept it.

What's worse, she thought, is that here I am worrying about not being sure that I can love James the way I did, and Harry's so confident in how he feels about James that he's bonding with him. It just emphasizes how bad I feel about how I feel. Harry wouldn't be bonding with him if he was going to turn out to be Draco Malfoy. Wait, could it be to prevent that? That's an interesting thought. Maybe the phoenix-intuition reason that Harry doesn't know is that Malfoy's personality might have gotten stronger, or there might have been some influence, but once Harry's bonded with him it'll be easier to get rid of that. If that's the case, then I would be all right with that. I just wish I knew.

She wanted to talk to Neville; he had a way of making her feel better. She hadn't since the recent crisis began, because he'd been so busy. She didn't want to take his time

with Hermione from them, but she decided she would ask. Talking with her mother wasn't quite the same.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Molly came in without waiting for an answer. "Honey," she said sadly, "Kingsley just gave me a call, because he knows you're friends... they finally have a list of... from today, from Diagon Alley. Sheila Redmond was one of the ones killed. I'm really sorry."

Ginny winced. She hadn't seen Sheila for a few weeks, since the problem with James had started. She hadn't wanted to tell anyone else, and didn't want to be downbeat around friends without being able to explain why. Sheila had been the only new friend she'd made for a long time, and now she was gone. Just another thing to think about, thought Ginny bitterly.

Helen gave Hedrick a hug, and watched him head off to his dormitory. She looked at her map; the eight other Slytherin seventh years were in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Her and Hedrick's estrangement from them, the reasons for which still escaped her, had continued for three days. She wondered how long it would continue, when they would come to their senses. In a way she didn't want to see them, but she decided she would go anyway; they would want to know. Surely they wouldn't be so far gone that they didn't care.

She entered the classroom without knocking; she heard conversation abruptly cease, and a few hands quickly went into pockets, as if they were hiding something. She thought to ask about it, but realized they would only harass her for asking.

"What do you want?" asked Edward. His tone wasn't hostile, but closer to hostile than friendly.

She suppressed her annoyance. "I wanted to tell you that Hedrick's aunt and uncle died in today's attack," she said sadly. "Robert and Alison, you know, he's talked about them. He was really close to them. He's getting ready to leave now. I just thought you should know."

No one said anything for a moment, and Helen was chilled to see their faces. Their silence, she saw, wasn't because they didn't know what to say; it was because they didn't care. "I can't believe it's come to this," she said quietly, with great sadness. "I think I could come in here and tell you Hedrick died, and you wouldn't care. Look, just one last time... oh, never mind," she said in frustration. "Maybe one day one of you will tell Hedrick and I what we did to deserve this treatment. Then again, by then, we probably won't care." Holding back tears, she quickly left the room.

"I can't believe she comes in here trying to pull a guilt trip on us," said Derek. "I mean, first the two of them pull away from us, like we're not good enough for them, and now she wants us to be all sorry for Hedrick? I mean, I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be mean, but she should've known better. If they wanted to be on their own, they shouldn't come crying to us when something bad happens."

A few others nodded, and took out their artifacts; all were now glowing. "We should've gotten the map from her before, she almost took us by surprise," said Augustina. "If she sees these, she'll go running to Granger before we can find the ninth one."

"I just hope whoever got it hasn't graduated," added Sylvia. "We really need it."

"Like I said, just keep looking for one of the sixth or seventh year students who looks like they aren't getting along with their friends," said Derek. "One effect of these seems to be that the people you thought were your friends suddenly start treating you differently. Probably whoever it is, the same thing's happening to them. Keep your eyes open."

"What if they turned theirs in when it started glowing?" asked Matthew.

"They wouldn't," said Derek confidently. "Whoever it is knows these have a greater purpose. We all know it, we can feel it. When all nine of these get together, they're going to do something. We may not know what it is, but it's going to be great."

One of Harry's contributions to the Burrow soon after he acquired his unusual magical abilities had been to magically expand the apparent space of Ron and Pansy's bedroom greatly, increasing it by a factor of four. Now they had not only a bed, but also a nice living room set, including a coffee table; it was like having their own studio apartment at the Burrow. It enabled them to sit around in comfort and still have privacy.

They had finished dinner a half-hour ago. Ron was reading a magazine, but only half-reading it; Pansy could tell his mind was somewhere else. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

She knows I don't like to be asked that question, but she asks it anyway, thought Ron. "Nothing. Just stuff that happened. About Susan." In fact he had been thinking about the woman at the bar, continuing his private struggle to

determine his level of responsibility for what had happened, but he couldn't very well tell her that.

"That was so brave of her," said Pansy solemnly. "It must be really hard to run toward a dragon like that."

"She must have been hoping she could Disapparate once she got it away, but dragons are pretty quick," said Ron. "But yeah, she was really brave. I've heard more than a few Aurors say something like, that isn't a bad way to go."

"I can understand that," she said. "Just don't you go anywhere."

"I'll do my best," he said. He knew that he would've done the same thing—he'd risked his life enough times to be almost sure of it—but he always assured her that no harm would come to him. It was hard to be married to—or in their case, engaged to—an Auror, he knew, especially at a time like this. Pansy was bound to worry. Ron guessed that she knew that he knew perfectly well that his reassurances meant little in reality, that something could happen to him anytime, but she still valued them anyway. "They haven't tried to attack anyone with a Killing Curse shield, which is a good sign. Dawlish could never quite learn the energy of love, and Moody never tried. Neither of them was very well suited to it."

"You thought you weren't at one point, too," she teased him.

"Maybe I was just young enough to change. Anyway, I'm always with Neville, so I think we'll be okay. I did mention we have another shift tonight, right? We're working until midnight." The Aurors who could use the Killing Curse shield were working more hours than those who didn't, doing more patrolling, but they hadn't had the opportunity to rescue

anyone yet. "I know you are too, right now you're stretched even thinner than we are."

"We're at one and a half capacity," she agreed. "Yes, I'm going back, about when you are, but I may be past midnight, half the night for all I know. We just don't have enough people, even with everyone working."

"I just..." Ron stopped, just in case what he was about to say touched on what he wasn't supposed to say, then continued as he determined that it was all right. "I hope they didn't get anything that useful from me." He felt guilty about more than one thing, and this was one he could discuss with her.

She moved over next to him and put an arm around his shoulder. "You can't blame yourself for that," she said gently. "It could happen to me, it could happen to anyone."

He shook his head. "They even tell you in Auror training, don't drink alone," he said ruefully, vocalizing what he'd said in his head a dozen times in the past day. "I was just careless, I thought it was safe because it was a Muggle bar. I never imagined that anyone would follow me."

"There was no reason to think it," agreed Pansy. "I mean, these people are clever. It has to be more than Malfoy, somehow I don't think he's quite that clever. They were able to get to Harry somehow, past all the defenses he has."

"Wonder where they could have gotten information like that," said Ron glumly.

"Please don't blame yourself," she repeated. "It could have happened to anyone. You know I'm right."

He nodded, not wanting to debate it with her. He wondered whether the other part could have happened to anyone as

well. Somehow, he didn't think so.

A few hours later, as she was putting her son to bed, Ginny felt utterly useless. Her closest friends were very busy. Hermione, her duties nearly overwhelming her and under political pressure, had to tell some students that they had lost family members. Ron and Neville were out late protecting people, in danger every minute. Pansy was working hard at St. Mungo's. Even Harry had a purpose, though no one knew the reason. But there was simply nothing important for her to do. She could be practicing Quidditch—there was still an important match in two days—but she couldn't bring herself to do it, and now with Sheila dead, the match was as good as lost. While the match was important by Quidditch standards, it was no longer important to her.

She'd already cried herself out over his choosing not to bond with her—she knew she shouldn't use the word 'choose', since to him, he had no choice, but it was how she felt anyway. The loss was great because bonding was permanent; this had been a chance that would never come again. She'd been angry with Harry, but now realized that it was selfish of her to be angry. Harry was doing what he thought was right. She'd wanted him to bond with her, but now she would settle for his being a human again. Pansy said he wanted to be human again; at least that was something. She had feared at times that he would decide he liked being a phoenix better, and stay as one whether a way back could be found or not.

She walked over next to Harry, who was perched on the edge of James's crib. She leaned over and gently put her arms around Harry, as gently as she could, and spoke. "I don't know if you can even hear me. I don't know how much concentration is necessary. I'm having a bad time, you

probably know. I probably will again tomorrow. But right now, I want you to know I love you." She kissed the side of his head.

His eyes still on the crib, he leaned his head over and rubbed it against her head gently. She smiled, petted him for a few seconds, and went to bed.

It was well known to wizarding governments worldwide that the wizarding government of North Korea was run by Dark wizards. They put a polite face on it at international wizarding conventions, and pretended that they were just ordinary wizards. Most wizards in other countries didn't even know, because they didn't pay attention to such things, and the North Korean wizards didn't do anything to draw attention to themselves.

It was unusual enough that the wizards divided themselves along the lines set by their Muggle counterparts in 1953. Normally, wizard governments were set up along ethnic lines, which sometimes overlapped with the boundaries of the Muggle countries, and sometimes didn't. The Vietnam War never affected the Vietnamese wizarding government, which encompassed the whole country even while it was split politically by Muggles. The wizarding borders of Africa and the Middle East looked rather different than the borders for their Muggle counterparts, whose maps were drawn by Europeans, often based on political considerations. But in Korea in the early fifties, some Korean Dark wizards attempted to take over the government in Seoul—by political maneuvering, with only surgical violence involved—and failed. They retreated to the northern part of the country, and decided to set up their own government, taking for convenience's sake the borders used by the Muggles. The North Korean wizards became almost as reclusive as their Muggle counterparts, allowing no one into the country.

The wizarding government in Pyongyang kept very close track of all magic performed in the country, especially Apparation. High-ranking government officials and other politically important wizards excluded, one could not Apparate in North Korea without official permission for every Apparation.

What was suspected by other governments, but not known and not provable, was that the North Korean wizards controlled the Pyongyang Muggle government. They publicly denied any involvement, of course. Drake, however, knew that it was true, having found out through Malfoy. Apparently Voldemort had tried to recruit the North Korean wizards to his cause, both in the early eighties and the mid-nineties; both times, they rebuffed him. Drake could easily understand why; they already had power, even if over a limited area. Voldemort offered them more, but only under his supervision. Part of the appeal of power, Drake understood, was not having to answer to anyone.

It was evening in America, but morning in the suburbs, such as they were, of Pyongyang. Malfoy Apparated in front of an old house, but then again, almost everything looked old and worn-out in North Korea. Malfoy could have made sure his entry went unnoticed by using Drake's artifact, but the point was for him to attract attention. By chance, he Apparated in front of a middle-aged woman, about three meters away; he raised his wand. "Avada Kedavra!" he said, and the woman crumpled to the ground. Drake had felt that Malfoy might as well make a strong impression.

Within five seconds, ten wizards Apparated in, most about five meters away. Malfoy quickly cast the translation spell. "Identify yourself!" shouted the leader, a middle-aged wizard with a graying beard.

"I am Lucius Malfoy," he said calmly. "And you are Kim Tae Sok, I believe?"

"Yes, I am," the man said. "I remember you, but you are in violation of the law; you do not have permission to be here. I will take you into custody."

"I think not," replied Malfoy levelly, casting an area-effect Stunning spell. The wizards had cast their Protection shields, but all still received a jolt. Malfoy knew he wouldn't hurt them that way, but the point was to let them know how powerful he was. From the impressed look on Kim's face, Malfoy understood that the message had been received.

"Why are you here?" demanded Kim.

"I am here to deliver a message from my master. I should say, my new master, not the one you knew."

"How nice that you found a new master," said Kim with muted sarcasm. "And what is your new master's name?"

"His name is irrelevant," replied Malfoy. "You do not know him. He is responsible for the recent strife in America, Muggle America, and England, including the immobilization of Potter. He has considerable resources and abilities."

"I am duly impressed," responded Kim dryly. "Please continue."

"It is irrelevant to my master whether or not you are impressed. His message is that due to his manipulations of the American Muggle government, there will soon be an opportunity for your puppet Muggle government to invade South Korea without fear of American retaliation."

Kim's eyebrows rose high. "I do not believe that he can promise such a thing, unless you have a means of eliminating American nuclear capability all over the world."

"He can paralyze their political leadership without leaving indications that it was accomplished by magic."

"Why should I believe this man who will not show his face?"

"You can believe him or not. He says to tell you that you will recognize the opportunity when it presents itself."

"And why should your master benevolently offer us this opportunity?"

"It serves his interests for you to conquer South Korea. More than that I will not say. It is no great loss to him if you fail to take the opportunity. He simply wishes for you to know that it will be there. He will do what he will do in any case; he neither offers nor asks anything."

Kim slowly nodded. "Understood. Is there anything else?"

"No. I will come here if he wishes to contact you again." Kim opened his mouth to reply, but Malfoy had already disappeared away.

Back at Drake's hideaway, Malfoy reported in; Drake viewed the conversation, then dismissed Malfoy. Malfoy would be idle tomorrow, but with luck, would have one very important assignment on Saturday. It all depended on Brenda. The time to punish those most responsible for his loss was drawing near.

Drake considered Malfoy's encounter with Kim. The senior internal security officer had responded as Drake had expected; he was only one of those who participated in

decision-making. He'd had Malfoy speak a few small lies. It was the case that there *might* be a chance for North Korea to attack without nuclear retaliation. It was unimportant, because North Korea's massive standing army, even with lesser equipment, would defeat South Korea's, especially with the element of surprise. Even if America could respond with nuclear weapons, the North Korean wizards would not be harmed—they could easily track the missiles, and Apparate to safe locations if necessary. They could also put up magical shields around wizarding areas to protect from radiation, and of course they would not care how many of the Muggle population died. They were already killing their Muggle population by hunger, slowly and cruelly.

The thought caused Drake to reflect on the Muggle concept of sovereignty. It was one of the fundamental 'rules' of international relations: we won't interfere in your country if you don't interfere in ours. It was in each country's interest to play by these rules... unless you were the most powerful country, in which case you had nothing to fear. In general, though, sovereignty was considered so fundamental that it even trumped genocide or mass murder. North Korea was killing thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of its own people each year, but despite much hand-wringing at the United Nations, nothing was done. Sovereignty meant that you could kill your *own* country's people; you simply could not kill *another* country's people. Recently, Europe had tried to avert its eyes while Serbia killed and raped thousands of Kosovars for being Kosovars, until America finally intervened. Kosovo had been an exception to the rule, but Americans now seemed used to the idea that they could violate others' sovereignty if they had what they considered a good enough reason. If you had the power, you made your own rules.

Bright had the power in wizarding England, and four and a half years ago, he had made the rules. He had helped change the law to allow executions, and Drake's father and brother were executed because Bright didn't take sufficient care, nor did their society. Bright's society had been under great pressure, but that didn't excuse carelessness. Drake intended to find out exactly how careful British wizarding society and American Muggle society would be. He intended to make it a fair game: if a society restrained its extreme impulses and displayed care and moderation, it would not be further punished. There would be no point to the game if there were only one possible outcome. But if a society followed its impulses, acted as Bright's England had almost five years ago, it would both suffer and cause innocents to suffer. Maybe they would learn; maybe they wouldn't. But, thought Drake, people and societies would be exposed for what they were—good or bad. That was perfectly fair and just.

One more item of business remained before Drake would go to bed. It would take some time, but he didn't have to get up particularly early the next morning.

This was another of the things he had been planning for a long time. Right now, it would be very difficult to get to the Minister of Magic; his home and offices would be well guarded. However, in times when they had been less well guarded, it hadn't been overly difficult to enter Bright's house and set up a Portkey. So, it was not overly difficult now for Malfoy to take the Portkey there, wake Bright, cast the Full-Body Bind on his wife, and take him back.

Hugo was very unhappy to have to witness this; Drake had told him he would be allowed to leave soon after it began, but Drake wanted to be able to view it through Hugo's senses after it was done.

Drake Enervated Bright, who slowly looked up from his chair; Hugo imagined that it was the same position he'd been in when he'd arrived. "Minister," said Drake evenly; Hugo sensed a satisfaction from Drake that wasn't usually there.

"Who..." Bright slowly gathered his wits. "Brantell? What's going on?"

"He is here no more willingly than you," said Drake. "I have taken him into my service because of his highly useful abilities. My name is Leonard Drake. Perhaps the name will ring a bell. The surname, anyway."

Bright looked puzzled, then realization dawned. "Francis and Robert."

Drake raised his eyebrows. "How good of you to at least remember their names."

"I don't put men to death lightly."

"No, but you do not take care to make sure the correct ones are put to death," countered Drake. "First, I will see whether you genuinely thought they were guilty or not."

Drake cast Legilimens, but put down his wand after a few seconds. "I see that you are a fairly accomplished Occlumens. Of course, the problem with Occlumency..." Drake whispered the word "Crucio," and Bright convulsed and screamed loudly, falling to the floor; Hugo winced as he all too vividly remembered it being done to himself.

Drake stopped after five seconds, clearly feeling it was enough to make his point. "The problem with Occlumency is that it does nothing to prevent that. I trust I will encounter no further resistance." He cast Legilimens as Bright

whimpered and gasped. Bright looked up at Hugo; Hugo looked down, unable to meet Bright's eyes.

After a minute, Drake lowered his wand. "I see that you accepted the word of Mr. Stapleton that all those killed were sufficiently culpable to deserve death. I will be seeing him soon; I suspect that he lied to you, for your own political benefit. At the time, it would have been difficult for you to explain to the population that a few of the attackers did not deserve to die, so he decided to spare you the decision. Quite noble of him, if misguided.

"This decreases your culpability, but does not eliminate it. Those in authority are responsible for the mistakes of their subordinates, and as you well know, you committed an act of cowardice by not checking everyone personally. It was your responsibility to do so; what follows is your punishment for not having done so." Drake paused, enjoying Bright's fearful expression. "Minister, are you acquainted with Frank and Alice Longbottom?"

Bright's eyes went wide as he understood Drake's meaning. "No," he gasped. "Please, no..." He looked at Hugo in desperation, as if Hugo could do something.

Hugo was finally able to meet Bright's pleading eyes. "Minister... believe me when I say that I would trade places with you if I could."

Drake nodded. "Indeed, he would. You are not useful enough, Minister, for me to do with you what I am doing with him. I suspect that most people, given the choice of having their spirit broken or being tortured into insanity, would choose the former. Brantell knows better.

"As I have told him, generally speaking, I am not a sadist. Torture is an instrument, not a form of enjoyment. I usually

have Mr. Malfoy do it, as he does enjoy it. But for one with whom my grudge is personal..."

Knowing that it was useless, Bright nevertheless lunged for Drake. "Crucio," said Drake, and Bright again collapsed, screaming. This time, Drake did not stop the spell.

Following Drake's instructions, Hugo remained for a minute, using his senses to record Bright's mental agony. Then he turned and left, returning to his quarters. He closed his eyes and tried very hard to focus on love, on compassion for Bright, what he was going through. It was the only thing he could think of to do.

Even though it wasn't in the morning's Prophet, news of what had happened to Bright spread with lightning speed throughout the wizarding world, especially at the Ministry. Madeline Bright had identified Lucius Malfoy as the man who had somehow gotten into their home and taken her husband, only to return him two hours later. Or, rather, to return the shell he had become.

The undersecretaries met early in the morning to discuss the question of the now-open position of Minister. In such a situation, as had been the case when Cornelius Fudge was assassinated five years ago, a new Minister was to be chosen from among the undersecretaries. The process had been known to take weeks; Dolores Umbridge gave a speech in which she urged that, given the need to stabilize wizarding society at such a precarious time, the undersecretaries unanimously approve Roger Trent as the new Minister. A vote was taken; the vote was eight to three in favor, but unanimity was required to circumvent normal procedure.

The floor was then opened for nominations for the position. Umbridge immediately nominated Trent. Arthur then

nominated Amelia Bones, to her surprise. There were no other nominations, and a preliminary, non-binding vote was taken. The result was the same: Roger Trent received eight votes, Amelia Bones received three. They took a break, and Bones pulled Arthur aside into a small meeting room.

"Arthur! What are you doing?"

"I don't want there to be only one candidate," he replied.

"Well, neither do I. But I have no chance, you know that. Is this because of what happened to Susan?"

"Of course not!" he responded, dismayed. "I wouldn't exploit her death like that. I did it because if I could choose one of the undersecretaries to be Minister, it would be you."

"Thank you, Arthur," she said with a sad smile. "But we both know that Roger Trent is going to be the next Minister. All that remains is making the best deal we can, arranging the price for our support."

"You know I don't make those kinds of deals," said Arthur quietly. "I'm not going to start now. I'll vote my conscience."

"He'll take it out on your department," she pointed out. "He'll cut your budget and make you fire Dudley, maybe even try to get Colin reassigned. You know he has contempt for what they do."

"That would happen anyway," he responded. "The whole point of my being here, Amelia, is that I'll do what I think is right. If it means I spend the next ten years until I retire speaking out against what he does, then that's what I'll do. He can't reassign me, he can't remove me as an Undersecretary. If I start making deals to support someone I don't support, then I might as well not even be here. All I

can do is point out to him that he should leave me alone if he doesn't want Harry for an enemy. I don't know if he'll care."

"Without intending any offense, I'd suggest you pay Archibald a visit and discuss your options."

He smiled a little. "No offense taken. I didn't earn this position on the merits, so I'm not ashamed to get a little help."

She nodded, and they headed for the door. She stopped and looked at him. "Arthur... you may not have earned the position, but you deserve it. If anything, you're too good for it."

He smiled. "Thank you."

Harry felt himself drifting off as he watched James play with Dobby. In a flash, Fawkes was standing next to him. You must sleep, sent Fawkes. Even phoenixes have to sleep sometimes, and bonding is mentally stressful.

Yes, it is, Harry sent back. You know, I never really thanked you for bonding with me when you did. It saved my life.

You did thank me; you did it with your feelings. Come with me to the gathering place, you can rest there.

Harry reluctantly agreed. He focused on sending to James the impression that he would be back later; he didn't know whether or how well James would understand. He then reluctantly took flight and teleported away.

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Next, in Chapter 8: Dudley and Colin find evidence that a wizard is interfering in the Muggle world; Luna faces a wrenching choice about whether to use her powers to save a life.

From Chapter 8: Arthur's eyes closed, and he sighed.
"Incredible. I mean, not on the level of a dragon attack or what happened to Bright, but still..."

"I know," agreed Dudley. "It made me think of the Muggle phrase, 'like watching a train wreck in slow motion.' You know what's going to happen, you just can't stop it."

8. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

"Gather 'round, youngsters," said Arthur humorously as he closed the office door. "Lunch is on me today. I've called in to the express delivery service."

"Wow," said Colin as he, Dudley, and Luna took their seats. "What's the occasion? Did something good happen?"

"No, something bad," responded Arthur. "But we should splurge once in a while anyway. Roger Trent is going to be the next Minister."

"That's not exactly a secret, Arthur," Colin pointed out. "Everyone in the building thinks so."

"No, I know that. I only meant that it was the occasion. It's probably just me, I just had to spend three hours with the man. It's pretty grim." He started talking about what had happened in the morning, and didn't finish until their food came.

"I have a question, Arthur," said Dudley as he took the lid off his food; Luna had conjured small tables for her, Colin, and Dudley to eat their food on. "Well, a few, but first one about me. I know I'm probably gone if he gets in, but isn't he afraid of pissing Harry off? Harry could still come back, Trent doesn't know that he won't."

"That's the only thing that could keep you here," agreed Arthur. "We just don't know. If I were him, I wouldn't bother. If he cuts our budget so you have to go, he's hoping that Harry won't be angry enough to actively undermine him; he

knows Harry doesn't like to do that sort of thing. It would be a risk on his part, a stupid one to take."

Dudley nodded. "At least there's always my Dad's business to fall back on. My other question was, how does it get decided who's going to be Minister? That's never been explained to me."

"It's kind of complicated, but simple at the same time," began Arthur, but Dudley snuck in another question. "You don't have elections?"

"Not really, no. As an example, I'll explain what happened when Fudge was killed five years ago. The candidates are almost always undersecretaries, first of all. Bright was, of course, at that time.

"First, everyone who wants to run declares their intention to do so. It's considered good form to have someone else nominate you, but it's not required. So, in that case, Bright and three others announced their intentions. They started campaigning, giving speeches, interviews to the Prophet, meeting people, and so forth."

"The same thing that Muggle politicians do," said Dudley.

"Roughly, yes. But here's the difference: there is no election, but the object is to get enough support to be the winner if there were an election. The undersecretaries don't decide this; the people do, in a fashion. As the campaigning goes on, each candidate and his assistants talk to people throughout the wizarding world, getting a sense of how popular each candidate is. In the Muggle world, they have public opinion polls; this is similar, but unofficial. If a candidate's support is very small, he'll drop out so he doesn't embarrass himself by staying too long. If his support is good, but not good enough to win, he'll make a deal with

one of the other candidates—the one he thinks is most likely to win. Last time around, this candidate was Undersecretary Finch. He made the judgment that Bright would win, and threw him his support.

"Now, that doesn't necessarily mean anything; it's not as though people who would have supported Finch would then automatically support Bright. But it's an indication of how things are going, from an experienced politician. In exchange for his endorsement, Bright no doubt promised Finch something. Then it was only Bright and Trent, last time, in the end. At this point, it becomes a matter of which will back down first. Sometimes at this point it's very close in terms of public support; in that case, the one who eventually concedes will demand a high price for dropping out. Not money, of course, though it's long been rumored that Galleons change accounts at times like this.

"In the particular case five years ago, Bright clearly had the momentum and the support, so Trent was able to demand almost nothing for dropping out. It was thought at the time that Trent had overestimated his support among the population—he'd been the most powerful undersecretary under Fudge—and waited too long to get out. Each selection is different. But the system works very well."

"Excuse me," said Dudley, confused. "This may sound obvious, but what is it that causes the last guy to drop out? What if there are two people, and no one drops out?"

Arthur smiled. "Then we have a Choosing. This is the equivalent of a Muggle election, and it's very rare. Why is it rare?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Luna interjected, "Because we don't do it very often."

Colin and Dudley failed to suppress their giggles. "I'll bet your teachers loved you," Arthur said to Luna with amusement.

"Oh, yes, they did," agreed Luna.

"Anyway, it's rare because the system discourages it. This goes back to wizarding history. Colin, I hope you and Luna know this."

"Professor Dentus didn't teach it," replied Colin. "Professor Binns may have, for all I know."

"Something about an arbiter," suggested Luna. "I think I just happened to start listening at the right time."

"Yes, that's right," said Arthur. "A wizard who was born over five hundred years ago; nobody knew his name, but he was known as the Arbiter. He came up with this system. The idea was that they didn't want the people to be bothered all the time with choosing leaders, but they wanted the will of the people to be reflected. This was when they were setting up the Ministry for the first time, in the form we know it as today.

"Choosings are rare because the loser pays a high price. You can challenge a Minister, but if you lose, there's a penalty. If you work in the Ministry you lose your job, and can never work in the Ministry again. Also, you and your immediate family lose all your possessions."

Dudley's eyebrows went high. "Wow! That's nasty."

"Yes, it is, and that's the point. The Arbiter wanted to discourage casual challenges. Now, that's only if you challenge a sitting Minister. If the spot is open... the Arbiter's portrait hangs in the room where the

undersecretaries meet the Minister. He never says anything, but he listens, and he has a few portraits in important rooms in the Ministry, so he can go back and forth. He gets a sense of the relative political status of all parties. The Arbiter decides which candidate is likelier to win than the other, who is then designated as the challenger. If the challenger wins, the penalty to the favorite is less severe; he can never work for the Ministry again, but that's all. The idea is that there should be a penalty for the loser in whichever case, to punish the loser for having overestimated his popularity and agreed to the Choosing when he shouldn't have."

"I'm glad I'm not going to be tested on this," muttered Dudley.

"It's not that difficult," protested Arthur, to doubtful looks from Colin and Luna. "The Arbiter chooses the favorite, if both are undersecretaries. If the challenger loses, he loses all assets and can't work for the Ministry. If the favorite loses, he can't work for the Ministry. See? Not so hard. I was just trying to explain the facts and the reason at the same time."

"I'm almost afraid to keep asking questions," half-joked Dudley, "but how is the Choosing done? With a ballot box and pieces of paper?"

"No, that would be too easy," joked Arthur. "Seriously, too many opportunities for fraud. There are more magical ways to commit fraud than there are ways to prevent it. No, there are these two orbs, spheres almost a foot in diameter. The orbs collect magical energy. Each person who wants to participate in the Choosing stands in front of one orb and shoots a burst of magical energy into it, as strong as they can. The orbs are separated by a wall, but the portrait of the Arbiter is placed where he can see everything that's happening, including the chooser and both orbs. You can't

cast the spell twice, you can't do anything else without the Arbiter noticing. The choosing area is totally enclosed, so no one else sees what's going on; your choice is private. At the end of the Choosing, whichever candidate's globe is brighter is the winner."

Dudley struggled to digest it all. "So... Squibs can't vote?"

"They can try," said Arthur. "But essentially, no, you're right. The value of your choice is connected to how strong a wizard you are. Some wizards' choices might count for two or three normal people; others, less than half of one."

Surprised, Dudley remarked, "That doesn't seem fair."

"I can see why you'd say that," agreed Arthur. "It's just the way it was decided, and the way it's always been done. I guess they thought that magical power was what really mattered, so they rewarded it in this way." Luna wondered how powerful her vote would be; she guessed maybe ten normal votes' worth, maybe a bit less. She knew the important aspect of what she, Harry, and the First could do didn't have so much to do with raw power as it did with the vast variety of spells they could do.

"So, a candidate could get fewer votes than the other guy, and still win," commented Colin.

"Ah, like in America," joked Dudley; he was greeted with blank looks. "Never mind, it would take too long to explain. America's system is almost as complicated as yours."

"Well, yes, that could happen," said Arthur. "We don't know if it ever has. The number choosing each candidate isn't counted, just the magical energy."

"Okay, now let me try to get this," said Dudley, as Arthur tried to catch up on eating his food; he had been doing most of the talking. "Let's say the other undersecretaries chose Trent, but Harry became human again and decided to challenge him. Even if Harry had more public support than Trent, he'd still be the challenger because he's not an undersecretary?" Arthur nodded as he chewed. "And if he lost he'd have to give up his house, everything in his vault, even the stuff Dumbledore left him." Dudley knew those were among Harry's most valued items.

"Yes, that's right," agreed Arthur. "Even the book Dumbledore wrote him. Everything." Arthur didn't add, because the others didn't know, that Harry could simply conjure back anything he wanted. "Of course, he'd never challenge Trent or anyone in the first place, but I understand it's just hypothetical."

Dudley nodded. "And if Harry won, Trent would have to leave the Ministry. Just curious, I know Harry would never do it, but suppose he did. Who do you think would win?"

Arthur raised his eyebrows, intrigued. "If Harry came back and caught the people responsible for this, I think he'd have a shot. But in usual circumstances, I think most people would recognize that Harry's not cut out to be a Minister. Maybe twenty or thirty years from now, people will be asking him to do it."

"I wonder if he'd do it now to stop someone like Trent from becoming Minister," mused Colin.

"I'd never ask that of him," said Arthur seriously. "He'd be miserable."

Dudley brightened. "Hey, do you think he could win as he is right now? As a phoenix?"

The others chuckled. "That would be very strange," said Arthur. "I wonder if he would even be eligible. I'm sure the laws of the Choosing say that only humans can be Chosen, but Harry was born a human. I'd think that would be enough. Mention it to him sometime, he'll probably roll his eyes."

"Oh, yes, I know that look," agreed Dudley. "So, back to this situation, now, Trent will become the next Minister because no one else is nearly as popular as he is?"

"That's right. Sad to say, his political grandstanding over this issue has now paid off. People will associate him with security, and he was the best-known of the undersecretaries anyway. I don't think any of our current group could take him on. Amelia might be able to, and I think she'd be a very good Minister, but she just lost... she raised Susan, so she more or less lost a daughter just yesterday. I was surprised she made it in here today. No one would have blamed her for staying home. She probably feels a greater sense of duty because of the crisis. Like her daughter." He paused for a minute; there was silence. "So, Amelia's in no condition to run right now."

After another pause, Colin said, "It's so horrible what happened to Bright..."

"It's really awful," agreed Arthur solemnly. It was hard to think of much more to say than that.

"How's he doing?" asked Hermione, watching Bright gaze into nothingness.

"About how it looks," responded Pansy. "Almost totally unresponsive. I felt a little bad for both of you. This can't be easy for Neville."

"Yes, the associations are pretty bad," agreed Hermione.
"Kingsley told him personally. Anyway, I'll try, but I don't think I'll find much."

"Thanks for trying," said Pansy.

When Bright had been brought into St. Mungo's in the morning, along with a nearly hysterical Madeline Bright refusing to leave her husband's side, the senior Healers wanted him to be looked at by a Legilimens to try to confirm his condition and see if any memories were available. Healer Haspberg knew a man she normally called for such consultations, but he was missing. She knew he was probably gone for good, as she was sure Bright had known of him as well, and his memories could have been raided before he died. That had left them without a Legilimens to call. Pansy had volunteered that she knew one; it was publicly known that Harry was a Legilimens, but not that Hermione was one.

She cast the spell on Bright now, and dejectedly gave up after a minute. "It is what it looks like," she said heavily. "His mind's been fried by the Cruciatus Curse. I can't access any memories, only pain."

"Thanks for looking, Hermione. I know that wasn't fun."

Hermione nodded. "How are the burn patients doing?"

"A lot better, most of them. At least them we can do something for."

Hermione took Flora back to Hogwarts, as Apparation wasn't possible in most areas of St. Mungo's. Pansy gave Bright a last, sad look, and went back to her normal duties.

Dudley knocked on the door to Arthur's office; he went in, followed by Colin and Luna. Arthur put down the parchment he'd been looking at. "What is it, Dudley?"

Dudley tried to keep his expression deadpan. "Yeah, I was wondering if you could explain that election stuff again. I didn't quite get it."

Arthur grunted. "If you're not careful, I'll send you to Hogwarts and make you look it up in their library."

"I'm sure John would help me. Seriously, there are a few things we think you should know about. Luna actually found one of them, I found the other. Colin didn't find any of them."

"Sorry, Colin," said Arthur, "looks like when Trent cuts our budget, I'm going to have to fire you instead of Dudley."

"I knew this job was too good to last," said Colin, doing his best to sound sad.

"Okay," said Dudley, finally getting down to business. "The one Luna found had to do with Vicky, remember her?" Arthur nodded. "Well, you won't believe this, but she and her husband died in the sarin attack."

Arthur gaped. "You're right, I don't believe it. Harry saves her from one terrorist attack, and she dies in another?"

Dudley nodded. "It gets better. Well, worse, really. Apparently, she'd been keeping a private computer log of some stuff having to do with the whole nine-eleven and seeing Harry in her dreams thing, and she updated it with a long account of meeting Harry and the rest of us at Privet Drive. Lots of details—"

Arthur cringed in expectation of what was to come. "She posted it?"

"Not exactly. But after she got back, she worried about what wizards might do to her, with what she knew. Not Harry—she'd become a huge Harry fan, even bigger than Colin—" He shot Colin a grin, then continued, "but she worried that he might tell some people who'd find her and give her a Memory Charm or, worse yet, kill her. She knew from reading the wizarding websites that not all wizards are good. So she sent her private journal to two close friends for them to keep. The idea was that if she was given a Memory Charm and her computer sabotaged, it would help her remember. She told them that if she and her husband were to suddenly die, she wanted it put on the Web. They did die, and it's now there."

Arthur's eyes closed, and he sighed. "Incredible. I mean, not on the level of a dragon attack or what happened to Bright, but still..."

"I know," agreed Dudley. "It made me think of the Muggle phrase, 'like watching a train wreck in slow motion.' You know what's going to happen, you just can't stop it."

"We don't think this is extraordinarily bad," offered Colin. "It'll be considered part of the fiction connected to those sites. But she uses real names, Dudley and his parents, and their address. This story comes up now when you do a search on 'Vernon Dursley.'"

"Fortunately, because of Dad's business, it doesn't come up until the third page of search results, and people don't usually look that far," added Dudley. "He's going to have an aneurysm if he finds out. The last thing he wants is for

anyone to know that he has even the mildest connection to magic. Obviously that's not the biggest problem, though."

Arthur took a minute to think about what it might mean. "I agree, it's not terrible for now. But it's another straw on the camel's back. If they had only listened to me five years ago, it never would have gotten to this point. If this explodes, it's not going to be much consolation to be able to say, I told you so. All right, let me know if there's any public reaction to it on the wizarding websites. You said there were two things?"

"The second one was something I came across doing the usual searches for words like 'strange' or 'amazing,' this time connected to the Grand Central Station attack. It turns out that apparently—and it's a big 'apparently'—someone happened to have a camcorder running at the time of the attack. The video is a bit jerky, it moves around a lot; the guy started moving it around after he heard screaming. It shows a lot of the panic that was happening. But here's the interesting part: at one point, he had it focused on the brass clock, so you can see what time it is, and it's eight-twelve. There's all this panic, people running around, and in the middle of it the guy with blood on his shirt suddenly appears, like out of nowhere. He falls to the ground, he's unconscious—"

"What do you mean, he 'appears'?" asked Arthur.

"I mean, one minute he wasn't there, then he was. In the clip, you never see him standing. He can suddenly be seen at about eye or chest level, and he just drops to the ground. You can't see what happens perfectly, because of all the people running around. A lot gets in the way of the shot. But you can see enough to tell what's going on. If it's genuine, then it could be very important."

"What do you mean, 'if it's genuine?'" asked Arthur, concerned.

"This kind of thing could be faked," explained Colin. "Muggle technology keeps getting better and better. Someone could have taken the film in which the guy didn't appear, and use digital effects to make him appear. It could be done, even—I think—by someone who wasn't a professional, though he'd have to be pretty skilled. The fact that it can be faked at all has to be taken seriously. But the idea that it was faked doesn't ring true. Why do that? What would be the point? Also, the guy who took this video was hurt by the gas. The first day he got back, he said on his site, he uploaded the clips to his website. When did he have the time to alter the video?"

"Unless he's a total liar and fraud, in which case he's lying about everything, wasn't really hurt, and faked the image to get attention and increase traffic to his website," pointed out Dudley.

"It's not impossible," agreed Colin. "Which is why we have to take this with a grain of salt. But I read what he wrote, and I saw the video. It just rings true to me. I believe it."

"Assuming for the moment that it's true, that the image wasn't faked," asked Arthur, his face turning grim, "what does it suggest to you?"

"The same thing it does to you, I think," answered Colin. "A guy on a broom or an invisible platform, Disillusioned or under an Invisibility Cloak, dropped the Iranian guy to make it look like Iran did it, when in fact a wizard did it."

Arthur shook his head in amazement. "I don't want to even think about that, but I guess we have to. Setting aside for a minute the question of the motive of whoever did this, if

that did happen, it doesn't seem like a great coincidence that it happens while all this is going on in the wizarding world. I think we have to seriously consider that what you saw might be true. Right now, I want to see it."

"You can't," said Dudley. "The page isn't loading. I saved the page, but you can't save the video, it was streaming. I saw it four times, Colin and Luna only saw it twice. The page is overwhelmed. Colin thinks it's just heavy traffic, but I think it could be a DoS attack."

"And that means..." Arthur prompted Dudley.

"Denial of service. I don't know all the technical bits myself, but it's where you can basically attack a website and deliberately overload it, shut it down. The American government must have people they can call and say, 'shut this website down' if they don't like something it's saying."

"I think it's a little much," said Colin. "Like a conspiracy theory. I don't think they'd bother."

"I think they would," countered Dudley. "There's a big deal about who did this, they want as much information as they can get. They see this on a website, it looks strange, like it could get rumors started. They DoS it, and in the meantime send teams to the ISP to get the page taken down, and to the guy's home to get the actual video. I think it would be partly that they want to stop rumors, but more that they want to control whatever information there is. The question is, did anybody capture it before it was taken down. If so, then the government would probably just say it was a fraud, so they wouldn't have to explain something that looked strange. Governments don't like things they can't explain."

"I disagree with Dudley about this," said Colin. "But I can't say it's impossible, or even extremely unlikely. It just seems

a little paranoid. Anyway, whatever happened, it's not there anymore. We'll keep checking, of course, and do searches related to it. But we may not see it again."

"So, what do we do?" asked Dudley rhetorically. "Sit around and wait for something else to pop up?"

"Not much else we can do," said Colin, surreptitiously giving Dudley a light kick on the ankle, which Arthur couldn't see. "Arthur, do you think our American counterparts are looking into this?"

"I very much doubt it," replied Arthur. "I've met the head of their Muggle Relations Division, and he didn't seem to like Muggles very much. I didn't get the impression that they dealt with Muggles any more than they had to."

"Okay, well, we'll keep looking into it," said Colin. "We'll let you know if we find anything more." Colin stood, as did Luna and a confused Dudley. Arthur nodded and turned his attention to paperwork as they left. As they reached their desks, Dudley whispered sharply to Colin, "What the hell was that for?"

"I thought you were going to ask him to do something, or suggest that we did. We should talk about this later. Over dinner, maybe a Muggle restaurant."

Dudley eyed Colin suspiciously. "All right. But watch it with the kicking thing. Keep in mind that I own a pair of steel-toed shoes."

Kingsley sat at his desk at the Ministry, doing the paperwork that had to be done on behalf of the Aurors. He hated it, but someone had to do it; Dawlish, who'd had seniority on Kingsley, had hated the idea of paperwork so badly that he shared leadership of the Aurors with Kingsley on the

condition that Kingsley did the paperwork. Kingsley was starting to wonder if he could shove it off on someone; he decided to give it serious thought once this crisis was over.

A head suddenly appeared in Kingsley's fireplace; Kingsley didn't recall the name, but thought he worked for Trent. "Mr. Shackbolt, I'm calling for Undersecretary Trent. He'd like to see you in his office."

"Please tell Undersecretary Trent," replied Kingsley casually, "that if and when he becomes Minister, I will report to his office. As of this moment he is an undersecretary, and I don't report to the offices of undersecretaries." He returned his attention to his desk, ignoring the young man's surprised expression. The man quickly withdrew from the fireplace. Bet that gets a reaction, Kingsley mused.

Ten minutes later, Trent walked through the half-open door to Kingsley's office. "Kingsley," he said, not hiding his annoyance. "Do you really want to be playing these petty games with me?"

"You're the politician, Roger," responded Kingsley. "Petty games are your department, not mine."

Giving no reaction, Trent eyed Kingsley. "Is there any doubt in your mind that I'm going to be the next Minister of Magic?"

Kingsley gave Trent a cold stare. "Absent a very surprising turn of events, no. But you've done nothing but trash the Aurors since this crisis began, while we've been working our asses off to try to keep people safe. It doesn't make me inclined to be any more courteous to you than I absolutely have to be."

"I have not 'trashed' the Aurors," protested Trent. "I have criticized Minister Bright for his handling of them—"

"He didn't 'handle' us, and neither will you," Kingsley said. "He trusted us to do our jobs as best we could, and we've done that. If anyone's 'handling' the Aurors, it's me, and so you're criticizing me."

Trent looked at Kingsley appraisingly. "You're a grownup, Kingsley. You know perfectly well that I said what I said because it was politically advantageous to do so."

"Yes, I am a grownup, and I know that. But it's cowardly and ungrateful. People who are risking themselves don't appreciate being used as political pawns. You've never risked your life, so I don't expect you to understand that."

"I'm risking my life now, taking this job," countered Trent. "This isn't the safest job in the world right now, you may have noticed."

"Somehow I think they'll leave you alone," said Kingsley, knowing he was close to the edge of what he could get away with saying.

Trent bristled. "What exactly are you implying?"

"I'm implying that someone like you, who takes a hard line, is exactly what people who do this kind of thing like their enemies to have in power. They create fear, and you feed off that fear, turn it into power. They like to see us in a state of fear, it makes them feel powerful. You fan the flames of fear—for example, by implying that the Aurors aren't doing as good a job as we could—because you benefit from it."

"I think you're wrong," said Trent disdainfully. "Our enemies aren't happy to see me in power, because they know I'm a

bigger threat to them, I'll be especially aggressive—"

"Oh, please," Kingsley interrupted mockingly. "Say that in public, where people will believe it, but not here. That's your self-identification, that's the image you want to convey, but it's not the truth. We, the Aurors, are the ones that take on fights like this, not you. There is nothing you can do that will make any difference, nothing you can do that Bright wouldn't have done."

"You're wrong about that, too. When I take office, I intend to implement a full review of Auror procedures and—"

"You'll do no such thing!" Kingsley again interrupted, this time loudly, outraged.

"—policies, with an eye toward improvement. Are you saying your shop can't stand some scrutiny?"

Kingsley had to make an effort to calm himself. "You're in no way qualified to say what's an improvement and what's not, and anyone you appointed to do so would have an agenda. But the main point is something you know full well: Ministers don't interfere with the Aurors' internal workings. That's the way it's always been. We don't get involved in politics, and you don't tell us how to do our job. You tell us what to do, and we'll do it. You do *not* tell us how to do it."

"Yes, it's true that Ministers have traditionally let the Aurors do things their own way," agreed Trent, with a superior expression. "But that is a tradition, not a rule. It is not something I need hold to."

I can't believe he's saying this to me, Kingsley thought. This is obviously a power play; despite what Susan did yesterday, the Aurors look weak to the public right now because we can't catch whoever's doing this. Trent thinks he can take

advantage of that to intimidate me, to establish a superior position vis-à-vis the Aurors from the beginning. If I back down, it'll weaken the Aurors' standing for years to come.

Kingsley trained a calm, deadly glare at Trent. "You're a smart politician, Trent. At least, I think you are. So, I'm only going to tell you this once. Don't fuck with me."

Trent's eyebrows went high; such words were not used in anger even with undersecretaries, never mind one who would undoubtedly soon be Minister. "Or?"

Kingsley knew that Trent was hoping to bait him into saying something he could later repeat, something that would make the Aurors look bad. He stared at Trent silently. Let the bastard draw his own conclusions, thought Kingsley. After a half a minute, he said, "Was there anything else you came by to discuss?"

Trent seemed to be mulling his options. "Yes. I'd like two Aurors to be assigned for my personal protection. As I'm the Minister-in-waiting, I'm a highly logical target for our enemies. I'm sure you recognize that."

Kingsley almost gaped at the breathtaking audacity the request represented. Was it a peace offering, a backing off; give me two Aurors, and I'll forget this conversation ever happened? Kingsley was not going to spend that kind of manpower protecting this man when they were stretched thin already. "'Minister-in-waiting' is not an official or recognized position," he responded evenly. "Right now, you're an undersecretary, no different than the other ten. I'm not going to protect you without protecting the other ten, and we don't have the manpower for that. As you're very well aware, the power of the Minister right now can be

exercised only by the unanimous agreement of the undersecretaries. If all eleven agree, I'll do as you ask."

Trent held Kingsley's gaze, and Kingsley thought he saw the smallest smile. It suddenly hit Kingsley what Trent's purpose was. He could have come here and kissed my ass, thought Kingsley, made me promises, in hopes that I'd give him a couple of Aurors. Instead, he comes in and tries to slap me around. He wanted me to say no, so that at some point he could bring it up publicly as evidence that the Aurors weren't doing their jobs, or had a vendetta against him. He values political considerations above his own safety, I'll give him that much.

"Very well," replied Trent. Without a word, he stood and left. Kingsley sighed, wishing that somehow Trent could be denied the Ministership. He knew, unfortunately, that it wasn't going to happen.

Dudley, Colin, and Luna were sitting in a corner booth at a fairly nice Muggle restaurant that Dudley had recommended. Colin had asked for a corner booth even though it was next to impossible that they would be overheard by anyone magical; this restaurant wasn't near the Ministry, but required a trip of two Underground stops. "So, is it okay to talk now?" Dudley asked Colin sarcastically.

"For now, yes. If I need you to stop talking, I'll kick you again."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Dudley warned. "One of those old boxing flashbacks might kick in. So, what's the deal? What don't you want Arthur to hear?"

Colin didn't mind talking in front of Luna, because he knew Luna could be trusted, both for the article and in general. Luna got as much access as she wanted, but in return, the

people she spent the time with got veto power over what she wrote, within reasonable limits. It was the only way people could be comfortable with being observed all the time.

"I agree with you, I think we should do some investigating," explained Colin. "But I don't think we should ask Arthur. Not because we don't trust him, but for his own good."

"How do you mean?" asked Dudley.

"I mean, it's not going to look good to the other undersecretaries, especially Trent, if he has to explain that he gave permission for us to go snooping around in America; they'd laugh if we tried to explain this to them. And the Americans aren't going to help; you heard what Arthur said, they don't like to deal with Muggles. No one magical is going to look into this if we don't, but we can't do it officially. We really should, though. I agree with Arthur; I also don't like the way this smells."

"Well, I was thinking that we'd do something with the resources of the Ministry," said Dudley. "What can we do, just the two of us? And I'm not even magical."

"Yes, that would be a problem," agreed Colin reluctantly. "Luna, I don't suppose you'd be interested in going."

Luna tried not to think about how she could be of immense help to them; she could probably determine whether the video was genuine, and its disposition, in not too long a time. "No, I'd better not. I don't think the Prophet likes its reporters breaking the law."

Colin seemed dismayed by her phrasing. "I don't think it would be seriously breaking the law. We just need to find the guy who took that video."

"I already have his address," offered Dudley.

"So do I; I guess we found it the same way. I hope it's a current address, anyway."

"You can do Memory Charms, right?" asked Dudley.

Colin nodded. "You pretty much have to be able to if you're working in the Muggle Liaison office. And I can also Apparate you around, so that's helpful." It had been discovered that using the energy of love increased every wizard's power to the extent that he could escort others by Apparation without difficulty. It was still, however, illegal for all but authorized people.

"Just don't get us... what's that word..."

"Splinched?"

"Yeah, that. That sounds nasty."

"I wonder," said Luna to no one in particular, a faraway look on her face, "what would happen if someone got Splinched so that their head, chest, and arms were on one side while the rest of them got left behind." She paused; Colin was about to offer a comment when she continued, "You could just tickle their stomach, and they wouldn't be able to do anything about it."

Colin and Dudley looked at each other, neither knowing quite what to say. "It's safe to say I'd never thought about it quite like that," said Colin.

"There's a good reason not to get Splinched," added Dudley.

It took Colin and Dudley a few hours to do what they wanted to do. The man they were looking for lived in New Jersey;

they found his home only after getting a map, which they had to steal from a convenience store because they belatedly realized they had no American currency. The man lived in a small apartment building in a nondescript suburban neighborhood.

As they walked up the steps to the second floor, Colin said, "I wonder if he's even home. It is Friday night, after all."

"People who run websites aren't the most likely to be out Friday night," suggested Dudley. "Besides, he was hurt in the attack. He could be in bed, he probably is."

"If he is, I kind of feel bad for bothering him," said Colin. "But it is kind of important." They walked to apartment 204, and Colin rang the bell. There was no answer, so Colin decided to magically unlock the door. When he tried it, he discovered it was bolted; he exchanged a look of surprise with Dudley. "Someone's in there." Dudley nodded.

Colin waved his wand, and the bolt on the other side slid out. Colin opened the door; they stepped into a small living room and closed the door. Before they could react, a middle-aged woman was in front of them, three meters away, pointing a gun at them. "Don't move!" she shouted, very agitated. "Who are you?"

"We're... with a British newspaper," said Colin, remembering their cover story. "We just want to talk to—"

"Hands up over your head, where I can see them," she cut him off, holding the gun unsteadily in front of her. Colin had been keeping a hand on his wand, which was up his sleeve; if he did as she demanded, he wouldn't have access to it anymore. He'd hoped to avoid using magic, but it looked like there was no choice. He quickly cast a calming spell on the woman; she relaxed and lowered the gun. He then cast a

Suggestion charm, also a spell of particular use when dealing with Muggles. "You can trust us," he said earnestly. "We mean you no harm. We just want to know if the clip that Emmett put on the website was genuine."

The woman sat in a chair, tears starting to come to her eyes. "I wish it wasn't," she said, holding back a sob. "It's given us nothing but trouble. He's in the bedroom, he's still so sick from the gas that he can barely get up, but when he got home, he insisted that I bring him the laptop so he could put that video on his website. Then those men... I'm not supposed to talk about this, I'm sorry. Please, just leave."

"Someone told you not to talk about this? Who?" asked Dudley.

"Will you please just go?" the woman asked, her tone pleading. "I just want us to be left alone, to help Em get better."

"Of course," said Colin gently. "We're sorry to have disturbed you, ma'am. We hope Emmett gets better soon." He and Dudley walked to the door, and quickly exited.

"Why didn't you have her tell us more, maybe talk to her son?" asked Dudley quietly.

"I think we found out what we needed to know," said Colin as they started down the stairs. "Someone's been there, probably government agents. They probably took the video and told her and her son not to talk to anyone. She was pretty bent out of shape."

"Yeah, I noticed. Well, I'm pretty convinced that the video is genuine. You?"

Colin nodded. "I don't think she's that good an actress, and I don't think she could have resisted what I did anyway. Also, it makes sense, like I said before, that if he was hurt he wouldn't have had time to do digital manipulation on the video."

"So, now the question is, who did this, and why? What's the point? Why bother to make everyone think the Iranians did it?"

"Those are definitely the questions," agreed Colin. "Next stop, Harry's place."

"Why?" asked Dudley.

"Think Ginny would let us borrow Harry's Cloak?"

Dudley shrugged. "It's not like he's using it, but it is pretty valuable. She'd make us promise to be really careful. What are we using it for?"

"I'll tell you when I tell her. Where can we... oh, see that Dumpster over there? Let's go behind that."

"Can't we just wait until we get to Harry's place?"

"Very funny." They walked behind the large, blue Dumpster servicing a nearby apartment building, looked around to make sure no one was watching, and Colin Disapparated them away.

The parabolic microphone recorded the Disapparation sound; there was total quiet afterwards. The men in the van stepped out and casually walked to the Dumpster as if they lived in the apartment building. Seeing nothing behind the Dumpster, they looked around; there was simply no place to go. They spent the next fifteen minutes trying to work out

how the two escaped their surveillance. That wasn't supposed to happen, and they didn't relish the notion of explaining to their boss how two very young Brits had given them the slip.

Ginny was pleased to see them, even though it was late, and had them stay for a half hour to tell her what they were up to. She didn't object to lending them the Cloak ("I think Harry hasn't used it for five years"), and explained that Harry had put a sort of magical identifying marker on his most valued possessions so that if they were stolen or lost, he could find them again easily and simply cause them to appear, wherever they were. She urged them to be careful, partly because a Cloak would be hard to explain if they were caught, and partly because her father could get into trouble.

Colin then Apparated them to Grand Central Station, first equipping himself and Dudley with the Bubble-Head Charm in case there was any residue in the air. The station was closed, but they were able to walk around and look at the spots where the sarin had hit the floor. Two of the marks had no discernible pattern, but four looked as though the momentum had come from inside the hall. They had found out all they could; Colin Apparated them back to Dudley's apartment.

"Okay," said Colin as they sat. "What's the best theory right now?"

"A wizard, on a broom, with six containers of sarin," said Dudley thoughtfully. "He's in the middle of the room, near the clock. Using magic, he sends six containers of sarin to the six exits. He's holding the Iranian guy, or making him hover. I guess they're under a Cloak. When things start going to hell, he drops the guy. In all the panic, it isn't noticed, and anyone who sees it is going to die anyway. So

he wasn't all that careful about how he did it, and what we saw on the video is the guy falling under where the Cloak reaches. Suddenly, we see him. It never occurs to the guy on the broom that someone might be using a camcorder, because he's a wizard."

"It all fits," agreed Colin. "Except for that one, annoying question..."

"You mean, 'why'", said Dudley. "Yeah, I have no idea. And we're the only ones who know this?"

Colin nodded. "Because most people in the wizarding world don't even know about this. Ginny didn't even know. Okay, she's been preoccupied, and lots of wizards have been too. Also, we're the only ones who saw that website while the video was still up. It's definitely gone now, the government won't release it."

"You're sure they won't?"

After watching it for a second time, he said, "This has to be fake, right?"

The Homeland Security Director shook his head. "Our experts tell me that they believe, with a 99% level of confidence, that this is a genuine recording, not tampered with."

"But 99% isn't 100%," said the President. "They're not totally sure?"

The Director gave the President a wry smile. "Mr. President, if I held up my hand and asked them how many fingers they saw—"

"They'd say, a 99% chance of five fingers," finished the President, understanding.

"Yes, sir. Wiggle room. They're as sure as they can be."

"But as you know, Glen, that makes absolutely no sense."

"I know that, sir, and so do they. They can't explain it, since what's shown in the images is clearly impossible. We can only speculate that someone was able to do this extremely well, but we can't imagine how."

"Could the best Hollywood effects fool our guys?"

"No, sir. Some of our guys worked in Hollywood. They know what to look for."

The President nodded. "So, if it had been left on the Web, most people would have thought it was a really good fake."

"Yes, sir. We took it down to be on the safe side, and it looked genuine even at first glance. The only other problem is the young man who says he took it. He had no chance whatsoever to alter it himself, and he swears he didn't. He can't account for the exact whereabouts of the camcorder for twenty-four hours after he was injured, but the notion that someone stole his camcorder, tampered with the video, and replaced it is so unlikely as to be almost not worth considering."

"But not as unlikely as a guy dropping out of thin air."

"Exactly, Mr. President. There are simply no satisfactory explanations."

The President thought for a moment. "Not a single other person is going to see this. I don't want to have to try to

explain this." Finally cracking a small smile, he added, "Go put it where we put all those things we don't want people to ever see. You know, alien fetuses, government-created viruses, brains of super-geniuses, that sort of thing."

Glen smiled. "This is a new department, Mr. President. I haven't been briefed on that place yet."

"I think the FBI director knows. I'll call him and tell him you need to see it."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

The man left, and the President was alone, with a few minutes before his next appointment. He sighed heavily and thought about the videotape he'd just seen. He remembered that his most unusual briefing in the transition period after he'd been elected was one that involved a man who said he was a wizard, and did a few demonstrations that were very convincing; the former president had sat in as well to help explain it. Evidently there was a community of these people, small compared to the general population, who could do actual, real magic. Was that what this was? They had assured him that they didn't interfere in the world of normal people, and wanted nothing more than to be left alone. If it was one of them, thought the President, they'd know, and take care of it. They'd have no reason to do something like this.

In a thought that he would never admit to anyone else, and barely to himself, he knew that even if Iran was somehow not responsible, this was too good to let them off the hook. They look guilty as hell, and they're acting guilty with their non-cooperation. I can't just say, well, it was something bizarre, so never mind. As long as they don't cooperate, as far as I'm concerned, they did it. This gives us leverage over

Iran, and I intend to use it for all it's worth. Those Iranian people, especially the young people, don't like their religious dictators. They want freedom. Those troops are over there, and it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to help those people live the lives they want to live. I have to do everything I can for them.

Such thoughts flew out of his head as his secretary poked her head in the door to announce his next appointment. He stood and walked over to greet his guest.

Lucius Malfoy had been busy. He had not killed that day; after killing so many the day before, he still had some of that energy, but it would wear off by tomorrow. His master had promised him that after tomorrow's main task was accomplished, he could go on another killing spree. The targets had already been chosen. And Hogwarts... the timing couldn't be predicted—he was surprised it hadn't happened already—but that would indeed be a feast. There was much to look forward to.

He had spent a lot of the afternoon conjuring. It was a small room, about three meters by three meters, and a raised bed. Standing in one particular location, he had conjured dozens of metal bars, and arranged them in horizontal rows, from the top of the room to the bottom, nine inches apart. Then more bars were arranged vertically, again nine inches apart, from left to right, so that it covered one 'slice' of the room. Where the bars met, he caused them to meld together. He continued the process until, except for where he was standing and the bed, the room was completely taken up bars going up-down, right-left, and front-back. The bars stopped over the bed, leaving just enough space for one person, lying down.

Such unusual precautions had to be taken because when the guest arrived, a phoenix could not be allowed to come, bearing assistance. A phoenix might still be able to squeeze between the bars, but it could do nothing but sing. The song was annoying, but no worse than a distraction. The phoenix would also be able to know the location immediately, and take Aurors to outside the room, but he had already put powerful magical safeguards outside the room that would stop anyone from getting in for the time required.

He had wanted vengeance against Potter for a long time; it was one of the few desires his master had not conditioned him out of. Potter personally could not be killed, or even harmed physically. But he had been immobilized, and would soon be harmed more badly than he ever had before.

Ginny awoke the next morning and went to check on James. To her surprise, Harry wasn't with him; Harry had barely left his side for the past two days. I guess he had to sleep, she thought. She picked James up and took him into the kitchen for breakfast.

She picked up the day's copy of the Prophet and read it while Dobby fed James. The lead article was about what had happened to Bright; a secondary article focused on the near-inevitability of Roger Trent's ascension to Minister, a subject on which she'd heard plenty from her father at dinner the night before. It was very depressing to think that someone like that was going to be their leader for who knew how long. Well, we suffered through Fudge, she thought, we can suffer through this guy. The problem was, her father had said, that he was the kind of person that the more you got to know him, the less you liked him. He appeared fine to crowds, and in brief one-on-one meetings with citizens; it just wasn't so good to get to know him. She wondered how Harry felt about the prospect. Right now, he probably doesn't care, she

thought. Why should he, he's a phoenix, it's hard for him to concentrate on any human matters as it is.

She'd had an unpleasant evening yesterday; after dinner, the manager of the Chudley Cannons had called her in the fireplace and asked her to reconsider her decision not to play in the weekend's important match. It pained her to say no, because she felt as though she was letting down the team, but she felt she just couldn't do it. She could see how disappointed he was, and could imagine that her other teammates felt the same way. The problem was, he couldn't know how things were for her, and she couldn't explain it to him. That had put her in a bad mood all through the evening. Not that she'd had many good moods lately.

At least the weather's nice, she thought as she stepped outside. It was sunny and clear; the temperature was in the mid-seventies. Great weather for Quidditch, she thought sourly. Look at me, even thinking about nice weather can remind me of something bad. Probably because there's not much in my life that's good right now. Before, it was my husband, son, and friends. Now my husband is stuck as a phoenix, my son may have a killer lurking inside him, and my friends are so busy they can barely find time to pay attention to their partners, much less me. What does that leave me with? Mum. She's been great, but she can't support me all by herself.

She went back inside, picked up James, and carried him with her over to the Burrow, making an effort to enjoy the weather and respond to James' limited attempts at speaking. When she got close, she saw someone Apparate about ten meters away from the front door of the Burrow, and waved with the arm that wasn't holding James. "Luna!"

"Hello, Ginny," said Luna with a smile. They approached each other, and Luna focused on James. "And hello there. I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name! What's your name?"

"I'm James," said James, his eyes eager.

"Yes, James, that's right! And my name's Luna. Can you say 'Luna'?"

"Oona!"

Ginny and Luna laughed. "He's not so good with l's and r's yet," said Ginny.

"Maybe he was Asian in a former life," joked Luna.

Some of the life drained out of Ginny's face; Luna noticed, but had no idea why. "That would be nice," managed Ginny.

"Blue!" shouted James. Luna glanced down and saw that her hands were a moderate shade of blue; she looked at James and Ginny in shock.

"James, no!" admonished Ginny. "Not for people! You can do it with blocks, toys, but not people!" James suddenly looked sad and guilty.

The color was already starting to fade, but Luna was still astonished. "He can do magic? Without a wand? At age two?"

"Harry's been working with him on it," said Ginny. "The idea was to get him to do it without a wand from the beginning, so he didn't learn that he needed one the way the rest of us did. Listen," she added, her voice taking on an urgent tone, "Please, please don't tell anyone about this. We don't want this, or him, to become a media thing. You know how Harry is

about his privacy, and he dreads the idea of a Prophet headline like 'Potter Boy Can Do Wandless Magic At Age Two,' like that. I'm sure you understand."

Better than you can know, thought Luna. "Of course, Ginny," she said earnestly. "I won't tell a single person, I promise." To James, she said, "You're a very impressive little boy. And very cute!" She smiled, and chuckled when James smiled back. "He really is a sweetie," said Luna to Ginny admiringly.

If only you knew what was in there, thought Ginny. I hope you're right. "Yes, he is," she agreed with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. "Luna, what you said before reminded me, at dinner a few weeks ago you said that your mother had already been reincarnated. I guess you've learned about this from the mystics in Tibet, but do you think your mother's personality is reflected in whoever she was reincarnated as? If you met her, do you think you would see any similarity?"

Luna was intrigued by the question, and thought for a few seconds. "I don't think so. Each life is in many ways a clean slate, and a lot of who we are has to do with environment and experience. We do have some inborn characteristics—my father says I've always been a little goofy, even for a child, and I'll bet you were spirited from a very young age. I think our soul kind of chooses those. But they have more to do with the whole collection of our past lives than the very most recent one. So if I recognized anything in her, it would have more to do with her soul than her personality in the life I knew her in. Why do you ask?"

Ginny shrugged. "It's just an interesting question. I should read about it more." Luna knew immediately that Ginny was lying. She didn't know if she knew because of her new abilities, or just intuition, but the topic clearly had a deep

emotional resonance for Ginny. But Ginny didn't want to talk about it, so Luna wouldn't press her. "So, what brings you over here?"

"I just had a few questions for your father," she said. In fact, Luna knew the questions could have waited until Monday, but she'd come anyway; she'd had a sort of intuitive feeling that she should visit. She didn't know why, but she did it anyway. "I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see me, since he doesn't see me enough at the office."

Ginny smiled. "I think he likes having you there. He said he thinks Colin also likes having you there."

Luna chuckled. "Colin's also a sweetie," she said, running a hand gently through James' hair. "I don't know, I've always been very fussy about men. Maybe because I feel that I have to have just the right one, because I'm kind of unusual. I think that one of these days I'll look at a man, and I'll just know, I'll get a feeling that he's the right one. I have a feeling you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do," said Ginny. "I just hope mine comes back to me at some point."

"He'll find a way back, Ginny," said Luna. "I really think he will." Luna didn't know why she was so sure, but she felt it.

"Thank you, Luna. I do try to tell myself that." They walked into the house. Ginny didn't know whether she took comfort from Luna's feeling that Harry would come back, but she was comforted by what Luna said about past lives. Maybe I should go talk to those mystics myself, she thought, maybe they'd make me feel better.

They walked in the front door to see Arthur in the living room, talking to Colin and Dudley. "Wow, just like at the

office," Luna joked. "What's going on?"

Arthur's expression was serious. "The boys were just telling me about their little crime spree last night. If anyone outside this room finds out, they and I will be in trouble. But what they found out, or are pretty sure about, is disturbing."

Dudley briefly recapped what had happened for Luna and Ginny. "So, we can't say we're 100% sure. But it's the only thing that makes any sense, all the facts point to it. The problem is, what to do about it. We were asking Arthur if he thought it would be possible to get some Aurors on it. If that was done by wizards, it's hugely important. Oh, and Ginny, we brought the Cloak back."

"Thanks," she said. "So, can the Aurors do anything?"

"As I was telling the boys, no," said Arthur. "For one thing, it would be illegal, and the Aurors don't do illegal things without a profoundly good reason. But more than that, it's in another country, and if anyone got caught," he raised his voice slightly and glanced sternly at Colin and Dudley, "it would be quite an incident. The best we could do would be to tell our American counterparts, but I have to admit, they wouldn't do anything. This may just be one of those things we have to wait for more information about, something solid. I just wish they hadn't yanked that video off the Web so quickly. If I could even say I'd seen it, that would be different. Nobody's going to want to stick their necks out on the basis of what two junior Ministry employees say."

"Not to mention, Trent would make huge hay out of it," said Ginny.

"As I've already told these two, I don't care about that. I'm going to be a thorn in Trent's side. A small one, but one nonetheless. So, he's going to do his best to portray me as a

weirdo, and my interest in Muggles will be a big target. I won't back off saying or doing anything I would otherwise say or do because of him. There's something liberating about not caring whether you have influence or not."

James wriggled out of Ginny's grasp, and ran outside. "Guess he thinks it's a nice day, too," said Ginny. "I'd better go keep an eye on him." Luna sat as Ginny went back out the front door.

Ginny watched as her son ran around the yard. She had to make sure he didn't go into the garden, as the gnomes could be dangerous, even though they didn't tend to go looking for trouble.

The collie came bounding up the yard, heading for James. Cautiously, Ginny drew her wand; Molly had said the dog was friendly, but Ginny didn't want to be caught by surprise if that suddenly changed. She now saw that the dog had an old rag in its mouth. It approached James, shaking its head, clearly wanting him to play tug-of-war. James would never win, she thought, but at least he can play with the dog. Funny that we don't have a dog yet. We always intended to get one, but we just haven't gotten around to it. It would have to be really friendly—

Ginny's heart stopped as she saw James tug on the rag in the dog's mouth. Both James and the dog immediately disappeared.

Ginny was in shock for two seconds, then she screamed as loud as she could. Terrified, she knew exactly what had happened. Right under her nose, James had been kidnapped by Lucius Malfoy.

Everyone in the house came running out. "What happened?" asked a frightened Molly.

Hysterical, Ginny could barely get the information out. "That dog—rag in its mouth—Portkey—must be an Animagus—oh, my God, James..." Ginny started to cry, then realized something. "Harry can find him!" she shouted through tears. "That's why he bonded with him! Harry!" She shouted at the sky, but nothing happened.

Molly took out her wand, and whirled it. "Harry!" Nothing. "Fawkes!" Fawkes appeared seconds later. "Where's Harry?" asked Molly. "Never mind, bring Ron, we need Aurors! And Hermione, she can talk to the phoenixes!"

Hermione, alerted through Flora, Apparated in two seconds later; Ron, Pansy, and Neville were very close behind. Molly quickly explained what had happened, to Harry's friends' dread. "I'll alert the Aurors," said Neville, who Disapparated.

"Harry should be able to take them to where James is—" started Ginny, still extremely agitated, but was cut off by a high-pitched whine coming from the yard. Ron Summoned the source of the noise, which turned out to be a glass ball, a sphere about four inches in diameter; he didn't catch it, but let it hover in the air. They all knew what it was: a magical device called a Looking Glass, which could transmit audio and visual images. Ron cautiously activated it with his wand.

They could suddenly see a small room; another of the glass balls was apparently in an upper corner. It looked down on Lucius Malfoy, a bed on which a surprisingly calm James lay, and a grid of half-inch-thick metal bars crisscrossing all the open space the room would otherwise contain; its purpose was clearly to deny to anyone the ability to Apparate or otherwise transport into the room. The bars were close enough together that it looked as though even a phoenix wouldn't be able to get in.

"Where's Harry?" Ginny urgently whispered to Hermione. But before Hermione could answer, Malfoy spoke. "Wherever he is, he will not be able to help. This, today, is Harry Potter's punishment. There are Looking Glasses in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and the Ministry's Atrium which are transmitting these images. Harry Potter taunted and mocked the Dark Lord publicly. My retribution will also be public."

It registered through Ginny's terror and fury that she was more or less being watched by most of wizarding society. She tried to rein in her desire to scream at Malfoy, as James was totally at his mercy. "What do you want?" she cried, the stress on her causing her words to sound more like a plea than she'd intended.

"Why, retribution, of course," responded a smiling Malfoy. "Were you not listening? But I understand that you mean, what do I want in exchange for your son's safe return. I want two things. One of them is your four friends: your brother, Granger, Longbottom, and Parkinson. They must Apparate to a spot of my choosing and break their wands, after which they will be killed."

The four exchanged glances. "Just tell us where," said Ron defiantly.

"No," exclaimed an alarmed Ginny.

"It is not that simple, Mr. Weasley," said a satisfied Malfoy. "I said, two things. The other is that she must personally request you to do it; the offer is not valid otherwise."

Harry stood on the ground outside the structure his son was in. The wall between them didn't matter; proximity was what mattered. He didn't think about what might happen, didn't allow himself to worry, or to be frustrated that he had been sleeping when James had been taken. He focused on what

he knew he had to do. He focused on his connection to James, on transmitting one idea, one thought.

There was also a Looking Glass in Drake's hideaway; Drake and Hugo were watching. "Will she agree to his terms?" asked Drake.

"No," replied Hugo, miserable. He had spent an evening at Harry's home a year ago, and knew firsthand how deeply they loved their son. He could take only a tiny amount of comfort in knowing that it would be over soon. Malfoy had wanted to give her more time, and so stretch out her torment. Drake had vetoed the idea, on the grounds that Harry as a phoenix might be able to find his son, and take Aurors there. He was happy to make Ginny suffer—this was Drake's revenge on Potter as much as Malfoy's—but he would only take it so far.

Drake nodded. His expression was that of someone watching an interesting spectator sport.

Standing outside the Burrow with Colin and Dudley, five meters away from Ginny, Luna started her internal debate. With a mere thought, she could put James back in Ginny's arms, and Malfoy in custody. Odd, she thought, that she could do that without knowing their exact location; seeing them was enough. She had told herself she wouldn't do things like that, but her resolve was weakening.

"You bastard!" screamed Ginny. She started to sob, knowing in that second that James was as good as dead. She wouldn't, couldn't, do what Malfoy asked. She was sure he knew that, and made the demand just to torment her.

"Ginny—" Ron started.

"No!" she shouted and took a few steps away from him, not wanting to look at him or the others. She looked down and closed her eyes. Where was Harry? Was he transporting Aurors to the site? She couldn't ask, because they were being monitored. She prayed that he was.

"Very well," said Malfoy, looking disappointed that his enjoyment had to be curtailed. "This is the Dark Lord's revenge, and mine as well. Potter as much as killed my son; now I kill his." He pointed the wand at James.

"Avada—"

Ginny screamed again.

Luna saw what Ginny was suffering, and knew what she would suffer if James died. She decided to do it, to save James.

Before she could do anything, time stopped. Everyone was frozen in place but her. She wondered if she had done it, then turned and saw the First standing to her left. She made sure she and the First were the only two not frozen, then turned to the young, or at least youthful-appearing, Asian man. "What are you doing?"

"I am... providing you with a moment of reflection," he said calmly. "It is very easy, I know well, to be caught up in the emotion of the moment."

Luna took a deep breath; she realized that she had been on the verge of tears. "Are you saying I shouldn't do it?"

He shook his head. "You know that I would not use a word such as 'should.' If you follow through with your intention, I will not try to stop you. As I said, I simply want to allow you to reflect a moment. You made a decision when you

discovered this. You are now on the verge of going against that decision. I am only saying that you may want to consider the ramifications, both for yourself and for others."

"I'm thinking about others!" she responded, nearly shouting. She paused, calming down. "I'm thinking about Ginny. This will destroy her, if it happens. She'll never be the same again."

"Perhaps," conceded the First. "But she may come through it better than you expect. There is no way to know. Would you deny her the opportunity?"

"She wouldn't want the opportunity!"

"On a conscious level, no, of course not," agreed the First. "But as you know, there are other levels, other reasons why things happen to us."

"Hasn't Ginny already been through enough?" argued Luna. "Having to watch the man she loves nearly killed a dozen times?"

"That is not something you can know. There can be deep, soul-based reasons that things happen. For example, there is one element of the current situation that may be considered such a reason."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"It is, of course, very private to Ginny," said the First. "But you could find out for yourself, as I have; you simply have not done such things yet. Many things can be discovered in the true realm."

He took her hand and led her over to a more open space in front of the Burrow; she followed him and sat on the grass

with him. It seemed very strange to look up and see the frozen images—Ginny in mid-scream, the horror on the other faces, especially Molly's. She gave the First her attention.

"A few weeks ago, Harry and Ginny discovered that the previous life lived by the soul that is now James, was Draco Malfoy." Luna gasped in horror and empathy; she now realized why Ginny had asked those questions a short time ago.

"Harry accepted the information with relative equanimity; his main concern was for his son's welfare. He accepted that his son's personality was different than that of Draco Malfoy. But Ginny has struggled to reach that kind of acceptance, and has not managed it yet. She cannot shut out the fear that some element of Draco will manifest itself in her son, or the feeling that James is... tainted, that he can never be the person he would have been. Worse, she lost her faith in her unconditional love for him. It is difficult for her to look at James, and not see Draco."

More tears came to Luna's eyes. "Poor Ginny. That must be awful."

"There are reasons that she would be unusually susceptible to such concern," said the First, with compassion. "This situation is a crucible for her. It is wrenching, but it is an opportunity to learn, to experience, to discover things about herself. For example, if she sees her son die, she may come to realizations about the nature of the soul. This may allow her to see beyond her fear about Draco. Times like this are when we are likeliest to have deeply felt understandings. Saving her son may take that away from her. It is arguably not your decision to make."

"What good will it do her to see beyond her fear about Draco if James is dead? Is Draco just going to come back as her next child until she accepts him?"

"We cannot know, of course. It is not impossible. But it will do her good anyway; it is an important step in the understanding of the soul in her conscious awareness. She has had doubts about herself, doubts which she has repressed. This may help her come to understandings about herself."

"It's too high a price," Luna argued. "This could destroy her."

"It need not," replied the First. "On some level, she has chosen this. If James is to die, the spirit whose last incarnation was Draco Malfoy understood that when he chose to be born as Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley's son. If he lived, it could be seen as a demonstration that the soul is not evil, cannot carry evil. If he does not, then his soul would have paid a karmic debt, so to speak, to Harry and Ginny by accepting an incarnation which was bound to be cut short so that she or they could learn important life lessons through his life and death."

"And then, you have Lucius Malfoy, about to kill the spirit that was once his own son," added Luna in wonder at the irony.

"Yes, though Lucius would not be aware of that until after he died," said the First. He paused; Luna could see his concern for her in his eyes. "There is another aspect of this which you may not have considered. I said a moment ago that on some level, Ginny chose this. Perhaps we can say her higher self chose this."

"A little over a year ago, when you and I talked in my cave, Harry saved one hundred and two people. What I am about

to say may be difficult for you to believe, but I assure you it is true: of those hundred and two people, forty-two died in the chemical attack on New York last week."

Luna gaped. "That couldn't happen by chance..."

"The odds against it are astronomical," agreed the First. "But of course, it was not chance. Their souls had reasons for dying at that time; Harry interrupted those plans. Some will continue on, making new plans, but some unconsciously chose to die, for reasons we cannot know. They took the next similar opportunity to do so.

"This is why, if I may insert my own value judgment, your original decision not to interfere with anyone but your immediate family was a good one. If you do this, if you save James, you will make more and more exceptions as time goes by, and like Harry, find you have to stop somewhere. I stress, though, that this is simply how I feel; others in my position might feel differently. Harry does; I believe he would do again what he did a year ago. I simply have a different perspective, as I have long been detached from human society. I am not immune to the emotion that you feel now, in this situation. I suppose I have been connected to the true realm for so long that I simply accept it as part of the process of life, of creation.

"If James dies, Ginny may not learn from it. She may become bitter, cold, distance herself from Harry or anyone who cares for her. It has happened before, to many people. There must be that possibility for our experiences to be meaningful."

He stood. "It is not my intention to persuade you; as I said, I simply wished to allow you the opportunity for introspection, to reflect on your choice. I will leave you now; you may

resume time when you have made your decision." He teleported away.

Still sitting on the grass, Luna put her head in her hands. Things looked so different in the heat of the moment than they did now, with as much time as she wanted to think. A short time ago, saving James had seemed the obvious thing to do. She had talked to him, seen the light in his eyes. Nothing like Draco Malfoy, she was sure. She felt an attachment to him. Then there was Ginny, so wounded by the knowledge of her son's previous life, now so desperate to see him live. If he died, Ginny's life would become a very dark place. She would blame herself for having distanced herself from him. But Luna's life had been dark for a while after her mother died. She and her father had struggled and suffered, but come through it by relying on each other, helping each other. She knew she had learned lessons from it, lessons that probably couldn't have been learned any other way. Maybe this would be the same for Ginny. Yes, Ron or Hermione would save James if they could. They'd give their lives to do it. But I can do it just like that. It's not the same.

She sat for another ten minutes, agonizing. With great sadness, she finally decided: she would do nothing. It was heartbreaking; she supposed this was the price she paid for even considering going against her original plan. She slowly walked back to her spot, standing as she had before so her movement outside of time would not be noticed. Holding back tears, she started time again.

Ginny's scream resumed.

"—Kedavra!" shouted Lucius Malfoy.

The green bolt only had a short distance to travel. But to Luna's utter shock, and that of everyone there, the green Killing Curse shield came on around James. He lay on the bed, calm and unharmed.

Ginny gasped loudly, then again. "Harry! The bond!" she blurted out as she realized what had happened. James was still in mortal danger. But at least he was alive.

Outside the structure containing James and Malfoy, Harry knew he had only bought James some time. He hadn't tried to teach James the all-purpose defensive magic spell, his intuition telling him that it would be too difficult. He had focused on the green shield, transmitting to James his own mental state when using it in the past. He now realized that he had encouraged James to use magic over the past two days because he would need to use it now. But he had no idea what Malfoy would do next, and he couldn't prepare James in time. Taking a guess, he focused on sending James protection against the Cruciatus Curse.

Lucius Malfoy looked as if he couldn't believe what he had just seen. He looked around the room to make sure someone hadn't snuck in somehow.

At the Burrow, Molly spoke. "What did Harry—"

She cut herself off at Dobby's sudden appearance. "Ginny Potter! Dobby heard screaming, and—" Dobby himself let out a shriek at looking up and seeing the Looking Glass images: Lucius Malfoy had recovered from his shock and was now holding his wand above James. "I suspect that a simple Severing spell, on the neck, should do nicely," Malfoy announced. He raised his wand, ready to lower it like a knife.

Dobby shrieked again, and vanished. To the further shock of those watching, Dobby appeared in the Looking Glass

images: he had somehow teleported into the room with Malfoy and James. Molly gasped at what she saw. The point of the metal bars had been to disallow entrance by Apparation. Dobby didn't technically Apparate, but it was almost the same thing. Dobby had teleported into the metal bars, disregarding their presence. One vertical bar now went through the right side of his head, and another through his left shoulder. He gasped in pain.

Malfoy paused his motion, astonished. Fury overcoming his pain, Dobby pointed his hand at Malfoy, and a liquid fire came out of it; like an ignited jet of oil. Malfoy either didn't have the time or the presence of mind to put up any shield, and he was suddenly on fire. Dobby kept the stream going for another second, then it stopped. Malfoy was fully ablaze, had dropped his wand in shock, and was himself restricted by the metal bars; he could go nowhere.

Gasping with the effort and increasing pain, Dobby Summoned James through the metal bars, making sure James' head didn't hit any. Grasping James by the shirt, he teleported away again.

He appeared on the Burrow lawn where he had left; Luna saw to her horror that one could actually see through the hole in Dobby's head, though it was starting to fill with blood and brain matter. Molly grabbed James and tried to catch Dobby, who fell to the ground. His left arm dangled uselessly from its shoulder socket.

"Dobby!" Ginny shouted, and knelt. Pansy raced forward, wand out, to see if there was anything she could do. They were joined by a gold and orange phoenix, who bent over Dobby's head. Tears fell into the gaping hole.

Dobby smiled at seeing Harry. "Thank you, Harry Potter," he said weakly. "But Dobby is happy. Even phoenix tears cannot..." The last word was a mumble, and he had no more strength. Ginny looked at Pansy; she cast a spell, then shook her head.

Ginny sat on the ground, held Dobby's hand, and cried. More phoenix tears fell on Dobby, not for healing purposes.

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Next, in Chapter 9: Ginny seeks help in her effort to deal with the absence of Harry; Drake is finally able to pierce Hogwarts' defenses, causing Umbridge to redouble her efforts to take over as headmistress.

From Chapter 9: Hedrick and Helen walked briskly, then ran, out of the castle. When they got close enough to see Snape on the ground, they broke into a sprint. They quickly got rid of the ropes; the Full-Body Bind had already worn off. "Professor! What happened?" asked Helen anxiously.

"The school is in great danger," Snape replied quickly. "Where are they?"

9. Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Thirty minutes later, ten people were gathered in the living room of Harry's home. Ginny hadn't let go of James for most of that time, except to have Pansy triple-check him for any injuries or problems. Each time, Pansy reported that he was fine. Ginny had spent much of the time crying, partly for Dobby, and partly in happiness that James was still alive.

She held him up in front of her, kissed him, and held him close again. Showing no emotional difficulties after his harrowing experience, he allowed himself to be held, not squirming or fidgeting. Ginny looked into his eyes, and knew that her faith in her love for him had returned. She'd known it the instant Lucius Malfoy had pointed his wand at James, and her terror in the moment was in part because she feared she had come to this realization too late. This was not Draco Malfoy, this was James. Now, she kicked herself for having taken so long to work it out.

Kingsley had joined them. Dudley had stayed, but Colin had left. Luna had started to leave, but Arthur asked her to stay, so she could write the inevitable article for the Prophet. She reluctantly agreed; she knew Arthur couldn't know what grief would be involved for her to relive the experience while writing about it.

"So," said a still awed Kingsley, "Harry bonded with James so he could teach him to use the Killing Curse shield?"

Hermione, communicating with Harry through Flora, nodded. "Harry didn't exactly 'teach' him; it was more that he transmitted the state of mind he feels when he does that

spell. He had James imagine the shield, he sent James the image and the idea that nothing was more important than making that shield. But yes, that was why Harry bonded with him. He didn't know why at first, of course. It was just the phoenix intuition. He was sleeping when James was taken, and as soon as he knew what had happened, he knew that this was the reason he had done it. It was Dobby who rescued him, but if Harry hadn't done that, James wouldn't have been around long enough to be rescued. So both what he did and what Dobby did were necessary, since Dobby didn't know what was happening at first. He only came out because he heard Ginny scream."

"That reminds me, how did Dobby do that?" asked Dudley. "I thought you had to know where someone was before you Apparated, or teleported, or whatever."

Hermione answered again. "This is something I've heard of, but it didn't occur to me at the time. One aspect of house-elves' magic is that they can teleport to their master anytime they want; they don't have to know exactly where their master is. It's maybe a little like how phoenixes can know where their companion is. Anyway, Lucius Malfoy used to be Dobby's master, so there was still that connection."

"You mean," asked a surprised Ron, "that Dobby could have led us to Lucius Malfoy anytime, and we didn't know?"

She nodded. "I'm not sure he even knew Malfoy was out there killing people. House-elves don't follow outside events much, they just pay attention to their home."

"I didn't know they could do what he did to Malfoy," said an impressed Dudley. "That was one nasty spell."

"House-elves have a lot of powerful magic," said Kingsley, "that they don't use most of the time. But yes, I didn't know

about that particular spell. I imagine it's for use against anyone threatening their master."

"I wish that meant this whole thing was done," said Neville. "But I think it's not. This wasn't only Malfoy. Malfoy wasn't a Legilimens, and someone on their side obviously was."

"Yes," agreed Kingsley. "But Malfoy was pretty powerful, as we saw more than once. They wouldn't have used him like that if he weren't. I'd have to think that someone will replace him, they just won't be as powerful. What we need to do is get at the brains behind this. It's too bad Dobby couldn't have gotten him alive. Not that I'm complaining," he added hastily.

"I wouldn't," said Ginny happily. "One thing's for sure, I'm not letting him out of my sight for a while, and he's not touching anything that I didn't personally put there. He's going to have to deal with an overprotective mother for a while, at least until his father comes back. By the way, Hermione, is this bonding going to be a problem for Harry? I mean, phoenixes usually only bond with a certain type of person, because they feel what the person feels, pretty strongly. Harry had been the youngest person ever bonded, at age sixteen. James is two, his emotions may be turbulent. He's not going to know to try to moderate his emotions for the sake of his phoenix."

Hermione nodded. "It's a good question. Harry says, just now, that the other phoenixes warned him about that. He knows the risk, but he knew it had to be done, so he did it. He'll just deal with it as best he can."

Dudley was the only person present who hadn't considered the possibility that Harry could bond with Ginny. "So, this

bonding with James... it means that James is Harry's companion when Harry's a phoenix, that's permanent?"

Ginny nodded, running a hand through James's hair. "I think most of you know, I wanted Harry to bond with me. Now, I'm so thankful that he didn't. You'd think I'd learn to trust phoenix intuition at some point. I guess it's just hard when it conflicts with what you want." She reached up to Harry, who was perched on the back of the sofa, and petted his wing. "Thank you, Harry. I love you."

Harry's response was to sing for a few seconds. "I think that means, 'I love you, too,'" said Pansy humorously.

"I think you're right," said Ginny. She still wished for her husband back, but one thing at a time. Her son was safe.

Drake spent some time thinking things through. This was a serious setback, he knew. He had invested a lot of time and effort in Malfoy, who had been not easily replaceable for that reason. A house-elf, he thought in wonder. Incredible, the things that'll trip you up.

He considered how to proceed; he needed someone for killing. Hugo was out of the question; he probably didn't know the Killing Curse anyway, but given the wand and the means, he would just as likely take his own life if he got the chance. Brenda was possible; he might be able to teach her, but he feared a diminishment of her capabilities in other regards. She was for infiltration, Legilimency, and intelligence. Whoever did the killing had to use the ring—in her case, because she wouldn't be powerful enough without it—and becoming addicted to the ring was a danger. She could kill, but not with the Killing Curse, and not with the ring. She would do it stealthily. He had a man who did the cooking, cleaning, potion-making, and other basic tasks for

the hideaway, but he had no utility in any other respect, and would be an even less suitable choice. Besides, someone had to do those jobs.

That left two choices. He could do it himself, or recruit someone else to do it. Each had its good and bad points. Doing it himself gave him more control, but exposed him to the risk of becoming addicted. He was sure he could regulate himself enough to control it, but it was better not to if possible. Having someone else do it provided less risk, but less control. There was no time to condition someone to the degree of control he'd had over Malfoy.

After thinking it over further, he decided that he would take Hugo on a recruiting trip. He would try Africa; he'd heard there were some good prospects in Nairobi.

As soon as she returned home, Luna spent an hour telling her father about everything that had happened, including her talk with the First. Concerned, he mainly just listened.

"So, I realized he was right. I mean, I'm not totally sure he was right about the people Harry saved, not all of them. Certainly that doesn't mean we should never save anyone in danger, and not all of those people Harry saved went and found another way to get themselves killed. But does this mean I can't, or shouldn't, save anyone anymore? Or only save someone I could have saved with my ordinary abilities? Or not even then, because I don't have to take risks to do it? I shouldn't feel guilty, but I know I would have felt horrible if James had died. I really thought he was going to. Now I even feel bad that Dobby died, because he died saving James, which I could have done. It's very difficult."

Her father nodded. "It sounds difficult. But I can see the First's point, of course. It almost sounds as though the

abilities you have, that Harry and the First have, weren't intended for humans."

"I thought about that. But another way to think of it, I think, is that it's another challenge for us, one of the steps on our road to... whatever learning we're doing. It's like, 'here's this power, but don't use it! See if you can manage.'"

"It's as though you have to fight against your impulses," agreed her father. "Your impulse is to save people that you can save. Suddenly, there seems to be a reason not to, but not saving someone you could feels very wrong. It's as though I were watching someone die on the street, and all I had to do was go to St. Mungo's and get someone, but I didn't, I just stood there and watched them die. It would seem unconscionable. I would feel bad about it afterwards, for sure."

"That's a good analogy," she said. "It feels exactly like that. And how do I stay... human, doing that? I can watch someone die, like James almost did, and have my heart break. Or worse, watch someone die, and not be affected. I'd rather suffer than not care."

"I don't think you have to not care," her father suggested. "I thought the whole point of this is that you can do this partly because you know the spiritual realm, you understand how the whole thing works. You talked to your mother, you know she's content. You've said that death is far from the worst thing that can happen to a person, that they're in very happy and comfortable surroundings when they die. Maybe it's the case that if you have this power, you're supposed to understand that so well that you're not affected when someone dies—not because you don't care, but because you know they're really not gone. They're just taking a break. Does that sound right?"

She smiled sadly. "Yes, it does. You're very smart, Daddy."

He shrugged a little. "You have the hard part, you have to actually do it. I think this is much easier to say than to do. And I do know that you feel bad for the people left behind, that they don't know that. They'll suffer, like you and I did when your mother died. I don't think you can be ambivalent about that."

"That's true," she agreed. "What affected me most about the idea of James dying is how it would have affected Ginny. I just hated to think of it. It's very hard to get used to the idea that it just has to happen that things that make us suffer will happen. I think the Tibetan mystics are more comfortable with that than I am, even if I can reach the spiritual realm more easily than they can. I feel like this should have happened to them, not me."

"From what you said, it sounds like they led a pretty secluded life. It's probably easier to be philosophical about that when you're not always interacting with people."

She nodded. "It makes sense. Oh, Daddy, there's so many things about this that are hard to adjust to. One of them, and this sounds selfish compared to the question of saving lives or not, but... I feel like this is going to change me, and I don't want it to. I like being who I am, even when it means people think I'm a complete goofball. Sometimes I think I like that people think that, then I can surprise them. I don't know if I can be like that anymore."

He affectionately moved her hair from her forehead. "I think you can. Of course this will change you; it'd be impossible for it not to. But I think there's no reason why you can't be who you want to be. I think it's just something you fear."

"I hope you're right." She moved over on the sofa, snuggling against him. "Thank goodness I have you to talk to."

"You always will. Especially now," he added humorously, "since you're not going to let me die."

She chuckled. "You better believe it. Sorry, Daddy, but you're not going anywhere. I need you."

He squeezed her shoulder, holding her closer to him. "I'm sorry, sweetie. This is such a burden, and I know you did it for me."

She shook her head. "Kind of, but almost more for me than for you. Like I said, I need you. But I think it was going to happen anyway. I think the First saw it, even before September eleventh, when he talked to me for the first time. There was a phoenix that hung around the mystics sometimes, which I now realize was him. He probably saw it then, and when he got the sense that the thing with Harry was going to happen, called me up there so I could understand what Harry had to go through. He wanted me to be more prepared for what I would face. But I just denied it, unconsciously of course. I didn't want to suffer what Harry had. My dreams started telling me, and I didn't listen to them. But I think fate wanted me to know, so it sent you and I to Diagon Alley that day when the dragon would be there; that was the only way I would have enough incentive to overcome my fear. It's funny, the First more or less said that most of the time, we shouldn't save people. I'm sure I was supposed to save you and those other people, since the point of this was that I found out what I could do. So it seems that we should save people, at least sometimes. If we're supposed to." She sighed. "And it'll be fun figuring out when those times are, since I'll want to save everyone anyway."

"I have a feeling you'll know," he said confidently.

"I hope so," she said, wishing she were as sure.

Ron, Pansy, Hermione, and Neville stayed at Harry's home for the rest of the day, Hermione taking a few hours at one point to check on Hogwarts. It was Pansy's first day off since the dragon attack; many of the wounded had recovered enough to go home, and it was now busier than usual, as opposed to being completely hectic. Harry stayed too, and at his suggestion, in the late afternoon he, Ginny, and Ron went for a fly. He was still bonding with James, but he could afford to take a break now and then, as the danger was past.

"Could you ask Harry how the bonding with James is going?" Ginny asked Hermione. It was getting late, but Ginny wasn't ready for bed yet, and the others didn't want to leave until she was.

The response came after a short pause. "Fine, apparently. Flora tells me the other phoenixes are very interested to see what happens, since it's unprecedented for any phoenix to bond with a two-year-old. Harry's sending out regular status reports. They were concerned that the emotional turbulence of a two-year-old would be hard on Harry, and it still may, but James has been pretty placid so far, which they think is due to Harry's influence. Which is the other thing they're concerned about: that since James is so young, being bonded might affect his character as he grows up, that he won't become the person he would otherwise have become."

"Wouldn't it be helpful?" asked Neville. "He'd be calmer, more peaceful, you know... more phoenix-ish."

"Yes, but the idea is that he should grow up the way he was meant to," said Hermione. "Assuming Harry can get back to human form, though, it should be all right. He won't be a

phoenix so much, so James wouldn't be as affected as he would if he were the companion of a regular phoenix. If Harry can't get back, then it could be an issue. It's better than James being dead, though, which he would be if Harry hadn't bonded with him."

"That's putting it mildly," agreed Ginny. "Speaking of that, how's it going on the whole Harry-being-a-human-again thing?" She shifted in her spot on the sofa and humorously added, "I mean, a woman has needs..."

The others laughed. Hermione started to answer, but instead turned to Harry. "Harry!" she said sharply, in an admonishing tone. To the others' curious glances, she explained, rolling her eyes. "He—he's joking, I should emphasize—he said that if it's all right with me, Ginny could borrow Neville for a while."

All four others burst out laughing. Neville recovered sooner than the others, adopted a solemn expression, and said, "Wow, only twenty-two and already being put out to stud. It's a hard life, but..."

"Very understanding of you, Harry," said Ron to the phoenix. "I'm impressed."

"I guess phoenixes don't get jealous," added Pansy.

"Well, I do," said Hermione, feigning annoyance.

Innocently, Neville asked, "Would it help if I found one of Harry's hairs, made some Polyjuice Potion, and—"

"No," said Hermione. "Anyway, Ginny, you were asking about getting Harry back as a human. I'm afraid the Magical Research Institute hasn't come up with anything. Snape's been working on it too, but he hasn't found anything that

he'd be willing to test, and he's not optimistic that he will. It's starting to look more and more like we'll end up having to go with the option we'd prefer not to. It all depends on how Ginny and Harry feel about waiting indefinitely."

"What option is that?" asked Ron.

Hermione looked troubled. "As I've said, we don't know if Harry will have a Burning day or not. Left to nature, he wouldn't have one for twenty years. It could be as long as fifty years if he lives as long as a phoenix as he would as a human. But the key question is, will he have a Burning day and then be reborn, as phoenixes are? Or will he just die, and not be reborn, because he's a phoenix Animagus? This would be a lot easier if we knew that."

"The phoenixes don't know?" wondered Neville.

"They won't say whether they know or not," said Hermione. "I'm kind of annoyed about it, to tell you the truth. They just say that it's something Harry has to find out for himself. The gist of it is that they'd be interfering with Harry's life journey if they told him. I think the idea is that he has to decide how much it means to him to become human again, whether he's willing to take the risk. If he decides to artificially induce a Burning day, he could just die then and there. It's really no different than if he tried a potion Snape wasn't sure of. Unless we come up with something really good, either he lives his life out as a phoenix, or he takes a leap of faith, and tries it soon."

"How would you artificially induce a Burning day?" asked Ron.

"By doing what Fawkes did in Hogsmeade," answered Hermione solemnly.

"Swallow a Killing Curse?" asked Ron, eyes wide. "I can't say I like the sound of that." He looked at his sister.

She closed her eyes momentarily. "I know what you mean, believe me. I just don't know what to think. I'm hoping it won't be necessary, but in the end, it'll be him that makes the decision."

"Harry says," said Hermione, "that he's just going to go by whatever he gets from phoenix intuition. He isn't going to analyze it and come to a decision in the way that a human would."

"Considering that phoenix intuition saved our son's life, I'm happy to go along with that," said Ginny. Now she wished she hadn't brought up the topic of Harry's return, as it just depressed her. She held James close again, and shuddered to think of how close it had been.

Ginny's four friends stayed another hour, then finally went to their homes. She had already mourned Dobby's loss with the others, but she gave him an extra thought before falling asleep. She thanked him, and hoped he was at peace. She suddenly realized that she knew he was, since house-elves would go to the spiritual realm when they died, just like everyone else.

It was a hot, dry day in Nairobi. Drake and Hugo walked along the newly paved streets on Susumbe, Kenya's main wizarding city and one of Africa's two largest. The city struck Hugo as very odd, as it seemed a mishmash. Residences stood alongside shops; there was no shopping district as such. Architectural styles were widely divergent; traditional African influences could be seen in a few buildings, but the main influences were European and Asian. Muggle-repelling charms protected the entire city from Muggle observation.

They found what they were looking for: a narrow, covered street which was the local equivalent of Knockturn Alley; wizards who couldn't take care of themselves didn't venture there. Hugo, again under the Imperius Curse, held the steel bar that would Portkey them away in an instant should something go wrong. Part of Hugo's job, of course, would be to give warning of something about to go wrong. Hugo and Drake had both taken Polyjuice Potion; great care had to be taken when dealing with someone over whom Drake did not and would not have full control.

They went into a place that looked like a tavern and did serve drinks, but its main purpose was to serve as a meeting place; its owner had connections to local Dark wizards, and set them up with those who did free-lance work. Usually murder-for-hire or prostitution, but any services one wanted, one could usually find. The owner took a commission, and a staff Legilimens gave warning of law enforcement and other undesirables.

Hugo and Drake took a seat, and were soon joined by the man they were there to meet. He didn't look particularly intimidating. His height was slightly below average, and he was on the thin side. He had a weak chin and large eyes. His head was shaved; Hugo felt that it didn't suit him. Hugo's unusual senses revealed a dangerous man, however; he had clearly killed many times before, without remorse. Oddly, he was not totally evil; Hugo discerned that there was someone this man loved, and that he had a sense of honor, flawed though it obviously was. Drake accessed Hugo's recent memories to get the information.

The man looked back and forth, trying to figure out which was the one he should be talking to. Seeing the look in Hugo's Imperius Curse-affected eyes, he settled on Drake. "What you want?"

No names were to be exchanged, not even false ones. "One-month contract," said Drake simply. "Mostly killing. Maybe a few other things."

"What few other things?"

Drake shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe kidnapping. You do the Cruciatus?"

The man chuckled scornfully. "'Course. Want me to show you?"

"Not now, thanks. Is there anything you don't do?"

"Don't rape. Don't kill children."

"This may involve teenagers," said Drake. "Do you have a cutoff age?"

A shrug. "Know it when I see it."

Hugo sensed that Drake was annoyed by the vagueness, but could accept it. "Do you have any other conditions?"

"You don't say it now, I don't promise to do it. You don't do any spells on me unless I agree. I don't eat with you, I get my own food. I don't take any potions I don't see being made. How about you?"

"You would be at my disposal, working only for me. You would take no public action not approved by me. I would know your location at all times via a tracking spell. You would take no potions or other substances of which I didn't approve. I would periodically do Legilimens on you to view —"

"No Legilimency."

"To view events only," finished Drake. "Only after an operation; nothing else would be viewed."

The man pursed his lips. "Don't like it, but okay. How much you pay?"

"Two thousand Galleons, for the month."

The man rolled his eyes. "Don't be wasting my time."

Drake shrugged. "All right, it was an opening offer. I expected you to come back with ten, and we'd settle at five. So to save time, here's my bottom line. Five thousand, plus another optional month at five thousand. One thousand for the option."

"Seven thousand," replied the man. Hugo's scan told him that the man found five thousand acceptable, but figured there was no harm in trying for more.

Drake again accessed Hugo's memory. "I said it was my bottom line. Five thousand." More than a normal year's salary, it was above average for this sort of work, and Drake knew it.

"Deal," agreed the man. "Oh, one thing. I'm a werewolf. That a problem?"

Drake almost smiled. "No, not a problem."

Ginny was having a strange dream. It was dark, and she seemed to be floating. She could feel a presence around her; someone was there, but she didn't know who. She felt as though she should focus on a place, just choose a place. She chose the front yard of the Burrow, where James had been kidnapped.

Suddenly she was there, and Harry was there with her—as a human. She smiled and hugged him, then kissed him. It had been too long. "You became human again!" she said happily.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't. Albus helped me set up a link to your dream, so I can talk to you this way. It's not perfect, but it's the best I can do."

"Do you mean, this is like how you talked to Albus just after he died?"

"Not quite. Albus had a specific link with me, with Legilimency, so we could create an environment. It wasn't a dream. This is a dream; I'm just kind of... joining it, you could say. You won't remember it as well as I remembered my talks with Albus. You may not remember it at all."

"I'll try," she said. "You can do this because of the connection phoenixes have with the spiritual realm?"

"Something like that. I don't totally understand it myself, it's mostly Albus who knows what he's doing. I'm just happy to talk to you."

"Me, too," she enthused. Suddenly sad, she said, "Harry, I'm so sorry. I was mad at you after you got trapped as a phoenix. I blamed you as if you had decided it, even though I knew you didn't. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"I understand why you did," he said reassuringly. "It was extremely stressful for you, and I hadn't been very understanding of your problems. After I first became a phoenix, I did it too much, and it made you feel as if you weren't important. Then the thing happened with James, and because it didn't bother me, you felt as though I wasn't really with you. Then all this happened. You had pent-up

frustration with me, and it came out as feeling like I had abandoned you."

"You're not usually so perceptive," she joked. "Is this from being a phoenix, you can understand it better?"

"I don't think so. If that were the case, I'd have understood it when I was a phoenix soon after I discovered I could transform. Some of it I've just figured out since then. I guess you could say it's from being a phoenix in one way; in the way that phoenixes can see people's personality, I've seen you a lot lately from being around the house. That helped me work some things out. I was very glad that what happened today helped you understand how you really felt about James. That was the reason it happened."

She frowned. "What do you mean? I thought the reason it happened was that Lucius Malfoy wanted to take revenge on you, on us."

"Well, yes," he agreed, "I meant it was the reason in a larger sense. There are some impressions, you could call them intuitions, spiritual intuitions, that I'm getting from the spiritual realm about this. The larger reason was for our experience, for our understanding. You see, the likeliest outcome of what happened today was that James died. I assume you remember from what Albus said before that there are lots, nearly an infinity, of parallel realities in which different things happened. In most of those realities, James did die. This was to be one of the great tests of your life. In this particular reality, Dobby made it his instead. But try to imagine what would have happened, how you would have reacted, if James had died."

"It's scary," she said, shuddering. "It's hard to imagine. I would have felt horribly guilty, I would have felt that he died

because I'd lost faith in the idea that he was really my son. I think I never would have forgiven myself."

"That would have been your challenge," he agreed. "You might have spent the rest of your life bitter, self-loathing, never confident of your ability to love, even me. But there would have been an opportunity to understand that love transcends everything, and to allow love to overcome your bitterness at what happened. If James had died, he would be here, as well as me. He would have told you not to be angry, with yourself or anyone, even Lucius Malfoy. You may have accepted it; you may not have. It would have been a huge challenge."

"But I already understand that love transcends everything," she pointed out.

"There's a difference between understanding something in an abstract way, and learning it through incredible hardship. For example, Bellatrix Lestrange killed Neville's grandmother, and Neville tried to torture her into insanity. That experience taught Neville not to do anything deliberately harmful in a way much stronger and more permanent than just knowing something. Lessons like that are learned at a soul level, in a way, carried from life to life. You can still learn the same lesson, just with not quite the same emphasis."

"That's all right with me," she said firmly. "As long as James is all right. Do you think I've already learned the lesson you were talking about? Or is there something more I need to understand, or to do?"

"There is one thing, one person it might help you to talk to," said Harry. "Don't be alarmed." Just as she was wondering what to not be alarmed by, another person suddenly

appeared, sitting on the grass near Harry. It was Draco Malfoy.

Ginny stiffened, and fought the urge to bolt. "What's he doing here?" she asked Harry fearfully.

"I'm here," said Malfoy, "so you can confront your fear. I'm what you feared was in your son."

"Are you the same Malfoy you were when you died?"

He shook his head. "Not really, since you aren't going to be the same, from here. Maybe you could say, I'm him, just now with spiritual awareness. It's a little hard to avoid that after you die. I'm mainly here to tell you that you have nothing to fear from your son. I came back as him as sort of an illustration that the soul isn't evil, that it's the choices we make that cause us to go bad. As Draco Malfoy, I was steered in a certain direction, steered towards evil. But I still chose it. I didn't have to. You would never have known it from what you knew of me, but I did have a conscience. There were times—I admit, not very often—when I felt bad about what I did, didn't hurt someone as much as I could have because I felt bad. I had it in me to change; everyone does. I just chose not to, because being evil was easier and more satisfying. Also because I was raised that way, that had a lot to do with it. But it had nothing to do with my soul.

"You found your faith that you loved your son, when you thought he was going to die. You would love him even if he were tainted. I'm here to tell you that he's not tainted. He has my experiences, his soul—my soul—learned from my experiences. He's going to have an extremely different life than the one I had. As you know, that's why we keep getting born again. But when you look at your son, you should look at him with no more fear than Harry would feel looking at

you because you were once taken over by Voldemort. You weren't tainted by that."

"I felt tainted," she said uncomfortably. "For a long time..."

"You still feel that way," said Malfoy, "very deep down. You did well fighting it off, but there's still psychic damage there. It showed up recently in how you felt. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

It dawned on her, and suddenly made sense. "It's why I was so disturbed by James's past life being yours," she said with amazement at the realization. "I'd never really accepted that I hadn't been tainted by being used by Voldemort. I sort of... put it aside when Harry fell in love with me, but I suppose I never really confronted it. I still have nightmares about it, but not that often. I guess I just thought I was stuck with them for as long as I lived."

"They were reminders," said Malfoy, "that you hadn't totally dealt with it yet. But yes, that was why you couldn't simply accept what Healer Vasquez and others were telling you. You felt tainted, so you felt James must be tainted. You couldn't look at it as logically as Harry and the others because of your experience. Something dramatic was necessary for you to understand this."

"Did it have to be this bad?" asked Ginny plaintively. "James almost died, and Dobby did die."

"Yes, it did have to be this bad," said Harry. "Life just works this way sometimes. We were targeted, in the physical realm, by evil because we fought it in the past. We may be again. This is also why, again from a spiritual viewpoint, I was stuck as a phoenix. As my human self, I could have stopped all this before it started, and you couldn't have had this experience. Tragedies always have reasons, even if they

don't seem apparent at first. As it was, we were lucky that he did survive."

Malfoy spoke again; it was strange to see him look peaceful, as he did now. "Are you still afraid of me?"

"I don't think so. It's easier not to be, seeing you like this. You have Draco Malfoy's appearance, but not his personality, at least not the one I associate with him."

"That sort of personality is only possible on the physical plane," agreed Malfoy, "so I couldn't speak to you with that personality even if I wanted to, from here. Not that you would want me to. But I get the feeling that talking to me has helped you understand. James having my spirit is irrelevant in terms of how good a person he is. I chose him as my next incarnation, and you—your spiritual selves—accepted me, so that we could all learn this. From James's death if necessary, but fate spared us that."

"I can't believe I almost stopped loving him," said Ginny sadly. "My own son..."

"That's your next challenge," said Malfoy. "To forgive yourself for that. The first step to that is understanding the reasons that happened, which you now do. The rest is up to you."

'The rest is up to you...'

Those were the only words from the dream that Ginny remembered when she woke up. She knew she'd had an important dream, she knew that Harry was in it, and that very important things were talked about and had been revealed. But she couldn't remember it. She didn't know of any ways to recall dreams, but she did remember that Legilimency could help.

She thought of Hermione, but hesitated at the idea of sharing something that intimate with Hermione, who was already more involved in her and Harry's lives than Ginny would prefer. Besides, Hermione wasn't quite such an experienced Legilimens. Deciding who she wanted, she dropped James off at the Burrow, then Apparated to the front gate of Hogwarts.

"You want me to help you retrieve a dream," repeated Snape, with mild incredulity.

"Yes, that's right," said Ginny. "I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important."

He motioned her to the sofa in his quarters, and sat next to her. "Very well," he conceded. "Clear your mind, do not actively attempt to recall the dream."

He cast Legilimens, and began searching. After a minute, he found it, and focused on the beginning, as an anchor. His eyebrows rose as he saw Harry explain to Ginny what was happening. Instead of letting the memory come all at once as he usually did, he viewed it in real time so Ginny would as well, and so remember better.

When it was finished, neither said anything for a moment. Then, to Snape's surprise, Ginny put her head down and started to sob. Very uncomfortable and not knowing what to do, he did nothing. After a minute, she looked up at him reproachfully through her tears. "When you're with a woman and she starts crying, you're supposed to do this," she said, moving closer to him and lifting his arm, which she placed around her shoulders. She felt him resist at first, then allow her to move his arm. "Then you apply pressure," she added, as if speaking to one who was simpleminded. It reminded Snape of how he had spoken to Harry many times before, on different subjects.

Snape held her as she asked; she continued to sob, the side of her head against his chest. "I... simply would not wish Professor Potter to think I was behaving inappropriately," he said uncomfortably.

She chuckled as she sobbed. "Liar. You just don't want to do it. You're in there somewhere, I know that. You just don't want to come out."

"What do you mean?" He looked genuinely confused.

She wiped her eyes. "I mean, the part of you that can be kind, that can have real emotions, that can be vulnerable." Finished crying, she sat up straight as Snape removed his arm from her shoulders. "Listen, Severus—" He gave a start, but she only paused for a second. "Yes, that's your name, and I'm going to call you that. The fact that you don't want people calling you that is part of how you distance yourself from people who care about you. I care about you, so does Harry. You know that. And I know you care about both of us, too. Remember when Harry was going to go into the Ring? You felt bad for me, and you were glad that things you said made me feel better. I'm not dumb, I can tell.

"I've wanted to say this for a while, and for some reason, I don't care right now. You were Cleansed for seventeen years; you couldn't feel any positive emotions even if you wanted to. Before that, you just didn't feel them naturally. But now you can. Harry gave you back the possibility of friendship, happiness, even love." She spoke and looked at him earnestly; he looked away, glancing at her sometimes. "But you've been like a turtle, staying under your shell, just peeking your head out once in a while. You can do what you want; I'm not going to try to tell you that it's wrong to hide. But I will tell you that I think it's a waste. You could have so much more. I think you just got comfortable in your shell. I

can understand that. I'm just saying, don't spend the rest of your life in there. You took huge risks to get rid of Voldemort. Take some risks for yourself."

He felt like snapping at her, or making a sarcastic comment, or telling her it was none of her business. But he realized, to his distress, that she was right. After his Cleansing was reversed and his full range of emotions restored, he kept to himself, telling himself that he wanted to get used to his new state before becoming any more adventurous emotionally. But four years had passed, and he had changed nothing. Repressing the urge to retreat yet again, he decided to stick a foot out of the shell.

"You're right," he said, looking ahead, meeting her eyes occasionally. "It's very easy to do. I think... on some level I told myself that I'd had enough challenge and difficulty for several lifetimes, and I deserved to relax, not to do anything challenging. Taking any sort of emotional risk seems very challenging; it always has. But I suppose the time is well past that I have any excuse for avoiding it. Harry allowed Tom Riddle to walk through the Veil of Mystery because, as Harry put it, Riddle was existing, not living. In a different way, I have been doing the same thing. I am not sure how to go about changing, however."

With her eyes, she let him know that she understood that it had been difficult for him to say that. "I can help you with that. I'll come by sometimes and bother you, talk to you, ask you questions. After you start to get comfortable being like that with me, you can start thinking about doing it in the real world. But one thing at a time."

"You will just visit, for no reason?" asked Snape, surprised.

"No, there'll be a reason," she replied. "There's something I want you to do for me, too. It's important, and only you can do it. I want you to teach me Legilimency."

His eyebrows rose high; without words, he asked why. "What happened made me feel like... Harry's weak link," she explained unhappily. "This wouldn't have happened if Harry were around. I can't do the things he does, and I'll probably never be able to. I don't think Legilimency was used to get to James, but it could have been. Someone could come at me under false pretenses, or with Polyjuice Potion, and I wouldn't know. But with Legilimency, I would. Right now... I'm afraid, Severus. I don't know how long Harry's going to stay a phoenix. It could be a long time, and I don't want to be vulnerable, me or James. I don't want to feel weak. I need your help."

He slowly nodded, thinking it over. "Why not Professor Granger?"

"You should be able to guess the answer to that," she said. "I love Hermione, but she's already involved in our life, Harry and I, more than I'd like her to be. More than she'd like to be, I suspect. Also, you're better at it."

"I know you know this, but I should emphasize," he said, with an appraising look, "that you would have virtually no privacy in your memories whatsoever—"

"Like I said, this is important to me," she said emphatically. "I don't care if you see every time I thought about Harry and touched myself."

He blanched slightly. "Let us hope it does not come to that."

She smiled at having made him nervous. "It probably won't, and I'll admit I was lying a little. But I was making a point."

Will you do it?"

He knew he would, and suspected she knew as well. "I will."

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"Why were you crying before?" he asked. "I did not see anything in particular in the memory to prompt it."

"It was just the whole thing," she said. "Especially the idea that I could stop loving James, I felt really bad about that. I think I was just getting that out of my system. So, do you mind if we start on the Legilimency now?"

He gave her a wry smile. "It will not surprise you to learn that I have no plans."

Two hours later, Ginny left his quarters. Snape sat for ten minutes, lost in thought. He picked up his wand and twirled it. "Harry."

The gold and orange phoenix appeared on the sofa where Ginny had sat. "Harry, did you arrange, or have any connection to, a dream that Ginny had last night?"

Harry slowly shook his head.

Snape nodded. "I didn't think so."

Before Drake finalized his deal with the African man, he explained the ring he wanted the man to wear. The man—Drake had decided to call him 'Joe' to have a way of referring to him when talking to Hugo—refused to commit to it until he could try it once. Drake decided to kill two birds with one stone, and took him to Hogsmeade. They went to the park, under an Invisibility Cloak, and snuck up on a couple talking a walk, more than a hundred meters from anyone else. Drake

cast a Full-Body Bind on the woman as Joe hit the man with a Killing Curse. He shuddered with pleasure as he absorbed some of the man's life energy. He gestured to the woman; Drake motioned him to go ahead. He killed her as well. "I will use it," he said with a smile.

Drake nodded; he hadn't told Joe that the ring was addictive. Joe didn't ask about any other properties it might have, and Drake saw no need to tell him. He intended to keep Joe killing at a rate at which withdrawal would not become a problem. He pointed his wand in the air. "Morsmordre," he said, and the Dark Mark appeared. He heard a few screams in the distance. More psychological warfare.

Roger Trent stood in front of six reporters in the Ministry Atrium. "Good morning. I'm here to take your questions, but first I'd like to make a statement. As soon as I heard of this morning's terrible events in Hogsmeade, I called an emergency meeting of the undersecretaries in an attempt to clear the logjam preventing a new Minister from being chosen. We need strong leadership to fight this continuing threat. However, my efforts were thwarted at every turn by Undersecretary Arthur Weasley. Only his vote stands in the way of a new Minister being chosen swiftly. I call on him to cease his obstruction, and I call on what supporters he has to ask him to do the same. Of equal importance, I wish to extend my sympathies to the families of those killed in this morning's attack. I will continue my utmost efforts to see to it that those responsible are caught. I will now take your questions."

A reporter raised his hand. "Are we to understand that you hold Undersecretary Weasley responsible for preventing your prompt selection as the next Minister of Magic?"

Trent nodded. "We must be realistic. I have the support of most of the undersecretaries, and I am told, a substantial majority of the population. No other candidates have declared their intention to compete for the position. There is nothing to be gained by delay."

"A week has not passed since Minister Bright's... incapacitation," pointed out another reporter. "The law states that one week is the deadline—"

"I know that," interrupted Trent. "But this is a crisis, and we need leadership. We all know there will be no other candidates. As a practical matter, there is simply no reason to wait. A unanimous vote among the undersecretaries could set aside that regulation, but Undersecretary Weasley will not agree."

"Why won't he agree?"

"I can't say," said Trent, an air of sadness in his tone. "I suspect that he relishes the fact that for now, he can obstruct the wishes of the rest of the undersecretaries with his single vote, and wishes to be able to do so for as long as possible. For some people, the ability to obstruct is better than no power at all."

"You know better than that, Roger," said Arthur, walking into the Atrium from where he'd been listening nearby. Trying to control his temper, he added, "If power was what I wanted, I'd have made a deal with you by now. Sorry, I don't mean to step onto your stage, but if you're going to ascribe motives to me, I'm going to respond." He addressed the reporters. "The only thing I am 'obstructing' is Undersecretary Trent's power grab. The one-week waiting period is the law, and it's a reasonable law. I'm going to see that it's protected. His claim that it's necessary for security purposes is ludicrous."

The Aurors are responsible for security, and any other measures that would increase security can be accomplished by the unanimous consent of the undersecretaries. If he or anyone has an idea that would truly increase security, they should propose it. He has not done so. The fact is that there is little a Minister can do about this sort of thing except support the Aurors, which Undersecretary Trent has not done."

"That's a lie, I have consistently supported the Aurors," shot back Trent.

"You've repeatedly criticized Minister Bright's 'handling' of them, which amounts to the same thing," responded Arthur. "He left them alone to do their jobs. Apparently you don't intend to do the same when you become Minister."

A reporter quickly interjected. "Undersecretary Weasley, do you believe that Undersecretary Trent will be the next Minister?"

Arthur nodded. "It very much appears that way, yes."

"Then why do you continue to futilely oppose him?"

"I've said this dozens of times, and I'll keep saying it," said Arthur. "Minister Bright appointed me to this position because he knew I would do the right thing—"

"You mean, because he wanted Harry Potter's implicit support," interjected Trent dryly.

Arthur ignored the interruption. "And I'm going to continue to do what I think is right. I don't think Roger Trent will be a good Minister of Magic, so I will not support him. It's really that simple."

"Who would you like to see as Minister of Magic?" asked a reporter.

"I think Amelia Bones would make an excellent Minister," responded Arthur. "Unfortunately, she has no plans to be a candidate, and I respect her decision. If no one has declared an intention to be a candidate by Friday, Roger Trent will be Minister. Until then, by law, the Undersecretaries possess the power of the Minister. His undue haste to assume the position before then is improper, and I will continue to oppose it." He glanced at Trent, who was clearly angry but trying to keep his face neutral. "I'm sorry, I didn't intend to intrude. I have no more comment for now. But I will remain, so that I can respond to any further comments that the Undersecretary may make regarding me."

The reporters turned their attention back to Trent.

"Undersecretary Trent, who do you think cast the Dark Mark this morning? Do you think it was Voldemort?"

"According to Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, Voldemort is dead. I am inclined to accept their word on that unless evidence to the contrary presents itself." Leaving himself wiggle room in case he wants to use the specter of Voldemort to create fear once he becomes Minister, thought Arthur.

"Clearly there is someone alive who can cast the Dark Mark," asked Rostoy. "Are you aware of anyone who can?"

"The only one who comes to my mind is Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape," said Trent.

"Do you consider him a suspect? Will you ask him about his whereabouts this morning?"

"I am confident that if he has nothing to hide, he will volunteer such information," replied Trent. "Perhaps he could give us more insight into what is happening."

Arthur sighed. 'If he has nothing to hide, he will volunteer...' He'd heard politicians say such words before, and the outcome was never good.

As soon as the press conference was over, Arthur headed straight for Hogwarts to tell Hermione what had happened. She went to the front gate and cast a charm on it that prevented anyone from entering without her specific permission, and a motion-detection charm to let her know if anyone came close. Then she went to Snape's quarters.

Snape laughed derisively. "It is none of their business what I was doing at nine-thirty this morning," he said emphatically. He had been teaching Ginny Legilimency, of course, which he intended to tell no one, even Hermione. If Ginny wanted to tell her, she could do so, but he suspected she wouldn't. "I will not even speak to them, much less tell Trent what he wants to know."

"I agree, of course," Hermione assured him. "But I wanted to warn you. Once he becomes Minister, he has the power to compel you to give—"

"I am perfectly aware of that," Snape cut in, annoyed. "Just because I disdain politics does not mean that I do not understand the way things work."

"I wasn't trying to offend you," she said defensively. "I was leading up to asking you what you planned to do when that happens."

"I will decide that when the time comes. Of course, in the meantime, it will be revealed that I killed Fudge, and if I

continue to resist, you will be pressured to dismiss me. If you do not, the governors may dismiss you. Then again, they may do that anyway."

She nodded, and stood. "I'd better talk to the rest of the teachers, see where they stand. I'll talk to them before the memorial service." She had decided to, after dinner, have a brief memorial for Dobby, since he had at one time been employed at Hogwarts. She wanted the students, as well as the house-elves (who would not leave the kitchens; she would arrange a Looking Glass so they could see from there), to see Dobby's bravery honored and to understand that house-elves were no less important than wizards.

In the early afternoon, Dolores Umbridge appeared at the Hogwarts gate. Hermione sent Hedrick, who had just returned to Hogwarts that morning, and Helen to meet her and inform her that Professor Snape declined to meet her or anyone from the Ministry, and that she was not to be allowed to enter the Hogwarts grounds. Hermione knew that refusing Umbridge entry would have a political price, but she feared that Umbridge, once there, would refuse to leave. Hedrick and Helen reported back to Hermione that they would rather help drain clogged toilets than meet with Umbridge again. "Just think of what it was like for us when she was headmistress," Hermione said. They agreed that Fred and George's fireworks and swamp suddenly took on a whole new meaning for them.

To Arthur's utter lack of surprise, in mid-afternoon he got a fireplace call from Trent, requesting his agreement to a directive to compel Severus Snape to account for his whereabouts at nine-thirty that morning. He refused, and immediately drafted a statement for the Prophet to the effect that he would oppose any effort to compel the testimony of anyone not under suspicion supported by

evidence, and that Malfoy could have taught anyone the spell that caused the Dark Mark to appear. "Questioning Professor Snape with no evidence to suggest his involvement is nothing more than an attempt to be seen as doing something," his statement concluded. "Professor Snape served our society with tremendous bravery five years ago as a spy against Voldemort, and deserves our respect and gratitude, not the lack of regard displayed by Undersecretary Trent. I grow more and more concerned about what unjust and improper steps Undersecretary Trent might take if he becomes Minister." Arthur knew that would probably get a blistering response, but he had to stand up for what was right.

Hermione decided to make attendance at the ceremony honoring Dobby mandatory; the students would be there anyway after dinner, and she was concerned that many wouldn't care, and leave. It would be Hedrick and Helen's responsibility, of course, to take note of any who were absent. Sometimes the map showing where everyone was at Hogwarts came in quite handy. It didn't occur to her to check during dinner, however.

At five minutes to six, Snape walked through the Hogwarts gate from Hogsmeade. To his right, about twenty meters away, he saw Gryffindor seventh year Andrea Creevey sitting under the tree near the lake. He didn't care whether she came to dinner or not, but rounding up stray students was one of the many unglamorous jobs of a Hogwarts professor.

He walked towards her. "Miss Creevey! Please head into the castle, dinner is starting."

She appeared to have been crying. "I don't want to. The others are being awful to me, I don't want to be around

them."

He'd heard such complaints from first and second years, but rarely from seventh years, from whom he expected a little more maturity. "Be that as it may, your presence is required at dinner."

Sullenly, she got up. "I'm not sitting anywhere near them."

Grow up, you little brat, he thought; he knew it was what he would have said before his Cleansing had been reversed. "That is your choice. Come along."

Less than a minute later, as they neared the castle entrance, he was surprised to see eight of the ten Slytherin seventh years; all but the Head Boy and Girl, who Snape had observed were currently not in favor with the other eight. "Inside the castle, dinner is starting," he said.

"We're not going," said Derek simply.

"You are incorrect," responded Snape, surprised at the disrespect. "There will be detention for anyone who does not immediately report to the Great Hall." He took a step, and realized that none were moving. He almost started to assign detentions, but he noticed a peculiar expression on all their faces, very different from their usual attitudes. As casually as he could, he reached for his wand, touched it, and cast Legilimens on Matthew, the one he considered the weakest.

He tried not to let his surprise show as he saw the memories play through Matthew's mind: finding the pyramids four years ago, their activation, their search for the one with the ninth, their certainty that whatever happened would be great. Snape's adrenaline surged, but he kept it completely off his face. Dealing with Voldemort for so long left him well able to control his reactions. He had heard of the artifact and

knew what it did, but he hadn't known they'd been distributed at Hogwarts. This was an emergency, but he couldn't take all eight of them; he had to get help.

"I will deal with your disobedience later," he said disdainfully. He took a step toward the castle, then heard Matthew's voice. "He knows. He looked in my mind." Snape broke into a run as he cast a Protection charm on himself. But their eight Stunners were too much for him, and he collapsed.

"What did you do?" shrieked Andrea.

"You have the other one, don't you?" asked Vivian. "We can sense it. The pyramid."

Andrea reached into her pocket, and pulled it out. "I was wondering what it was for. Is this why the others have been so nasty to me?"

"Yes, exactly," agreed Derek. "The same thing happened with us. Don't worry, you're with friends now. We can finally use them, do what we need to do. Come on, out to the Quidditch pitch."

"What about him?" asked David.

"Take him with us, hide him under the stands, Full-Body Bind and ropes should hold him. We can let him go after we're finished, or someone will find him. Let's go." Augustina levitated Snape, and they walked briskly away from the castle.

Hermione noticed that Snape was absent, but she assumed that he had important business, and didn't worry about it. She stood and spoke into the magical microphone. "Your attention, please. We are here this evening for a memorial to

honor the memory of a true hero, someone who called Hogwarts home for five years. His name was Dobby, and he was a house-elf. Many in wizarding society think of house-elves as nothing but servants, or slaves. But Dobby showed yesterday that house-elves are as good, noble, and worthy as humans, or any other creature.

"Most of you have already heard about what happened, but I want you to see it, because seeing is different than hearing. I warn you that the images are somewhat shocking and graphic, but life is like that sometimes, and you should not be shielded from it.

"Lucius Malfoy, a former Death Eater and servant of Voldemort, managed to abduct James Potter, the headmaster's son. Malfoy then communicated with Harry's wife and friends by means of a Looking Glass, which also recorded the images from both sides. I will now let you see and hear what happened."

There was near-total silence in the Hall as the images and sounds played. There were gasps when Malfoy used the Killing Curse, even though the students already knew what happened, and again when Dobby returned to the Burrow, mortally wounded. Watching it again, Hermione felt her chest tighten with emotion. She spoke again.

"Those metal bars were there to prevent anyone from Apparating in to stop him," explained Hermione, not quite able to keep her voice steady. "Apparating into objects is extremely difficult, and usually deadly. But Dobby did it because he knew that James would have died if he hadn't. By bonding with James, Harry had helped him focus enough to show him how to bring up a Killing Curse shield, even without a wand. But Harry didn't have time to try to teach him another spell; James was about to die."

Hedrick had noted the absence of the other eight Slytherin seventh years, but hadn't wanted to spend time confronting them. He and Helen had managed to avoid having to give them orders or detentions, but he feared it would soon come to that. He had decided that after the memorial, he would contact Pansy via Red, and ask her to talk to the others.

As Hermione spoke, he decided to check the map to see where they were. He stepped outside the Hall, still able to hear Hermione, and opened it. It showed that the others, and Andrea Creevey, were on the Quidditch pitch; he couldn't tell from the map if they were in the air or not. He also saw that Professor Snape was behind the pitch, in a place where it was pointless for anyone to be. He had the map play back their movements for the past hour; it looked very strange indeed. He debated quickly, then peeked into the Hall and gestured for Helen to join him.

He played back the past hour again for her. "Look at the beginning here, where he takes a few steps into the castle, then stops, then goes with them. That could make sense—maybe they wanted to show him something—but this was a mandatory activity. I think they might have stopped him from coming into the castle. And where he is now makes no sense. I think they might have attacked him."

"They wouldn't!" she exclaimed.

"I hope not. But this doesn't make any sense. Let's go out and check with him, see what he says."

"Shouldn't we wait until this is over?"

"If I'm right—"

"Okay, let's go."

They walked briskly, then ran, out of the castle. When they got close enough to see Snape on the ground, they broke into a sprint. They quickly got rid of the ropes; the Full-Body Bind had already worn off. "Professor! What happened?" asked Helen anxiously.

"The school is in great danger," he replied quickly. "Where are they?"

"On the pitch," said Hedrick.

Snape grabbed his wand and whirled it in the air. "Harry!"

Just as Harry appeared in the air above them, they saw a column of brilliant light rise from the center of the Quidditch pitch. It reached a point a hundred feet from the ground, then spread out in all directions, seeming to form a dome of light; Snape knew that it was following the outlines of the boundaries of the school's magical defenses. It crackled like lightning, and descended on the castle.

"What happened?" asked an awed Hedrick.

"The school is vulnerable," replied Snape. "Harry, take us to the pitch." Helen and Hedrick held onto Snape as Snape grabbed Harry's tail. He took flight, and in a second they were a few feet away from the others.

Eight of them, seven Slytherins and Andrea, were sprawled unconscious. In the center, the charred corpse and ashes were unidentifiable. It took an aghast Hedrick a few seconds to decide, by the process of elimination, who had been in the center. "Derek," he said quietly. He looked at Helen; tears had already come to her eyes.

Snape was not wasting any time. "Harry, have Red get Pansy —"

Harry had clearly not waited for Snape's request, as Pansy appeared and released Red's tail feathers; Harry disappeared. Shock came to Pansy's features as she saw the corpse and the unconscious figures. "Healer Parkinson," said Snape sharply, getting her attention. "Alert St. Mungo's. Have them evacuate these eight. They will be able to Apparate here and get them."

"What?" asked Pansy, stunned. Harry came back with Kingsley in tow.

To demonstrate, Snape touched his wand and Apparated a few feet to his left. "Hogwarts' magical defenses are down," he said, now addressing Pansy and Kingsley. "Magic is still possible, however." Pansy Disapparated; within seconds, Healers and assistants started Apparating in.

"Do you think there'll be an attack?" Kingsley asked Snape.

"No. Come with me to the Great Hall. You two as well," he added to Helen and Hedrick, both of whom were very shaken.

A minute earlier, Hermione had been wrapping up her speech when suddenly the Hall, and the castle, shook. The Hall lit up with unnatural light, and the light—provided by the magical torches at the sides of the Hall—went out; the Hall was completely dark.

There were dozens of gasps, and a few people screamed. "Everyone, remain calm!" shouted Hermione; the magical microphone was no longer working. She took out her wand and used it as a flashlight, scanning the tables. "Use your wands as flashlights," she shouted. The Hall suddenly lit up as all but the youngest students pointed flashlights in every direction; clearly, magic could still be done. But then, what had just happened?

To her great surprise, Snape and Kingsley Apparated in near the teachers' table. Snape quickly re-lit the torches, which stayed lit, and the Hall soon resumed its normal illumination. Snape reactivated the magical microphone. "The situation is under control," he announced. "Please remain where you are and await further instructions. Prefects, please see to it that no one leaves." Snape turned to Hedrick and Helen, who had just Apparated in. "Join us." To the other teachers, he gestured them to make a circle behind the table; they were joined by Kingsley.

"Hogwarts' magical defenses have been eliminated," he announced briskly. "Magic still functions within the school. A dangerous Dark artifact, composed of nine pyramid-shaped pieces, was deposited on the grounds on the morning of the broom battle nearly five years ago. The artifact was dormant until a week ago, when it was activated from the outside, no doubt by the forces otherwise disrupting our society. The artifact affects the minds of its possessors, causing paranoia of anyone not in possession of the artifact, and trust in those who do. When the nine pieces are brought together, they influence the minds of their possessors to deploy them in a certain fashion. When activated, it drains the life energy from eight of the nine and channels it through one; it then seeks magical sources and destroys them, or one could say, drains the magic from them. The magic that has protected Hogwarts for centuries is gone." He explained that he had been overpowered by the eight seventh-years, and that he was familiar with the artifact but had not known that Voldemort had possessed it.

"They had been acting really strange," said Hedrick, very emotional. Helen was still struggling with her emotions.

"Derek Wilson is dead," reported Snape as Helen sniffled and held back more tears. "The other seven Slytherin seventh

years, and Miss Creevey, are probably in critical condition."

Hermione fought a wave of regret; she remembered that Hedrick and Helen had asked her to have Harry take a phoenix-look at their friends, but in all the turmoil, she had forgotten. She wondered if it would have saved Derek's life. She struggled to focus on the here and now. "Hedrick, Helen, I'm very sorry. I know how close you all are. But this is a crisis, and we need a Head Boy and Girl right now. If you'd like to go to St. Mungo's and be with the others, that's fine. I just need to know now, I can find two other people."

They exchanged a look. "We'll stay," she said. Hedrick nodded.

"Is an attack likely?" asked Dentus.

Snape shook his head. "A head-on attack, such as we experienced five years ago, is highly unlikely. Magic still functions, and Hogwarts has the highest concentration of Killing Curse shield users in the wizarding world. Our enemy appears not to have large numbers, but works by stealth and subterfuge. We should perform frequent Polyjuice checks, be highly alert for any intruders, by ground, air, or Apparation. Mr. Shacklebolt, you should return to the Aurors immediately and have them closely monitor any Apparation that takes place in Hogwarts. No one here should Apparate without first clearing it with Mr. Shacklebolt. With your approval, Headmistress."

Hermione nodded. "Please do what he said, and talk to me again when it's finished." Kingsley nodded and Disapparated. To the others, she said, "Harry's flying around the outside of the castle, looking for anyone trying to get in. I think he'll see them if they do. I've asked Flora to join him, and she has."

"Good," said Snape. "That will be helpful. I suggest that it is imperative that from this point on, no one should be alone at any time, and teachers and students should stay in groups as large as possible. We must decide on sleeping arrangements; we may want to consider having everyone sleep in the Hall tonight. Dormitories would be highly vulnerable to Apparation and attack, even with Aurors monitoring Apparation."

"Okay," Hermione agreed. "I'll make a preliminary announcement in a minute, and we'll work out the details after that."

"Should we inform the Ministry?" asked Dentus.

"No," said Hermione. "There's nothing they can do anyway, and if they know, it'll be in tomorrow's Prophet. I do not want everyone in England knowing they can just Apparate in here, because I think a lot may do just that, saying they want to check on their kids. We can't have intruders, and we can't have Aurors hauling people away all day. We say nothing to the Ministry until tomorrow morning."

"Parents will howl," said Dentus. "So will the Ministry."

"Safety comes first," replied Hermione. "Not to mention, I don't want to attract Dark wizards or criminals." She had a sudden thought, and 'tapped' Snape with Legilimens, inviting him to view a memory. He did, and saw a snippet of McGonagall explaining the vault in the headmaster's office. He nodded, and Harry appeared above them.

"There is something the headmistress and I must check," said Snape to the rest. "We will be back shortly, and she will make the announcement then."

Harry took them to Hermione's office, where to her distress, the portraits of the headmasters were empty. "I believe they had to flee to their other portraits; they could no longer inhabit these," said Snape.

"The vault could have been accessed already, for all we know," said a worried Hermione. "The last thing we want is for our adversary to get his hands on a fortune. He could buy an army." They both assumed their enemy could have found the information about the vault from a Legilimens scan of McGonagall before she died.

"If we do not know the exact location of the vault, it is unlikely that—"

"I'm getting an image from inside the vault!" exclaimed a surprised Hermione. "Fawkes is in there, he knows where it is. I don't know what it looked like before, but it seems undisturbed. I think we don't have to worry about anyone Apparating in; there's only about three feet of vertical space, and they don't know where it is anyway."

Snape turned to Harry. "Harry, would you mind checking on the vault once in a while?"

"He says he'll do it," reported Hermione. "Also, Kingsley will have the Aurors monitoring Apparation. The vault should be safe. It may not even be accessible, come to think of it. I wouldn't know how to open it. I assume only the portraits know that."

"Yes, it should be all right," agreed Snape. "We should return to the Hall, so you can address the students." Harry took them away again.

The students did end up sleeping in conjured sleeping bags in the Great Hall. Hermione reluctantly decided that

Polyjuice checks had to be performed on everyone, and she and Snape checked all the students, the staff, and each other. She decided that everyone entering Hogwarts, even Aurors, had to be checked as well. Fortunately, the night was uneventful; four Aurors were in the Great Hall at all times, and there were no attacks or Apparations.

The next morning Hermione, operating on only four hours' sleep, traveled to the Ministry at eight-thirty to report to the undersecretaries on what had happened. As she expected, she had to deal with outrage and indignation from Trent and Umbridge at not being told promptly. Umbridge accused her of trying to 'hide the truth' from the Ministry; Hermione responded that if she were, she wouldn't be at the Ministry telling them what had happened. Unsurprisingly, this did little to mollify Trent or Umbridge. Arthur asked a few questions about the security situation and her plans for the next few days.

At Hogwarts, Hedrick and Helen were excused from their classes. It was partly because they wouldn't have been able to concentrate well anyway, and partly because with teachers busy teaching—except Hermione, whose normal classes became study periods—it was their responsibility to coordinate the movements of students throughout Hogwarts. Aurors had left for the time being; they would be back that night, but their constant presence was not a long-term solution to the problem. When she returned to Hogwarts, Hermione took aside some of the sixth- and seventh-year students who were better at Defense Against the Dark Arts and instructed them to spend mealtimes on watch against intruders in the Great Hall; they would eat after the others had finished.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, Hermione received an owl. She was with John, Hedrick, and Helen; even she could not be

alone. She knew it would not be good news, and it wasn't. She planned to look for Snape, but fortunately, he wasn't teaching right then, and he walked up to her group. He had been with students, but had been alone for the last part of his walk to the Hall, where she was. She tapped him, then checked him with Legilimency; it was their version of a Polyjuice check, since Legilimency would detect someone disguised with Polyjuice Potion. With a slight raising of an eyebrow, he checked her as well. "Professor Snape and I need to talk privately," she informed the others. "We'll step over to the corner. Please don't go anywhere."

Once there, she told him about the owl. "It's from the governors, they want me to meet with them at noon. They usually use the word 'request', but this time they used the word 'require.' I think we both know what this means."

He nodded. "They will replace you with Umbridge, and this time they will not take no for an answer. Unfortunately, outright defiance is no longer an option."

Glumly, she agreed. "With Hogwarts' defenses gone, they could take Hogwarts by force. They'd order the Aurors to do it."

"They could not," pointed out Snape. "They would need the unanimous consent of all eleven undersecretaries to do that, and I believe Undersecretary Weasley can be counted on to oppose such a request. Trent could, however, send Ministry officials to do it, using the governors' authority as their pretext. We would be in the unenviable position of having to use force to remove them."

She shook her head. "We can't do that. It would totally alienate most parents, and they'd withdraw their kids. There has to be another way."

Snape gave her a serious look. "This time, please allow me to go with you. I am more experienced in such matters; my presence may be helpful."

"I can't argue with that," she conceded. "All right, and thank you. But won't they just ask you where you were yesterday morning, about the Dark Mark?"

He smirked. "That is not their concern, and if they ask, I will tell them it is none of their business."

"Very diplomatic," she said wryly. "But you're right, of course. I do want to try something else, though. Maybe they'll be willing to negotiate."

"I would not wager on that," said Snape.

"Neither would I," she agreed. "But I should try, at least."

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 10: The assault, both physical and political, on Hogwarts continues; Trent jeopardizes lives by continuing to use the crisis for his own ends.

From Chapter 10: "Go get Arthur, now," said Dudley urgently.

"He's in a meeting with the undersecretaries—"

"Go in and pull him out of it!"

Luna had gotten up and walked around behind Dudley's desk, and saw what he was looking at. "Oh, no..."

10. Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

Hermione and Snape arrived at the meeting room exactly on time, brought by Harry, who then perched on Hermione's shoulder. Neither thought that the governors would be as intimidated by his presence as they had been before, but they felt it couldn't hurt.

They were greeted by twelve older wizards sitting at their usual spots at the table... and a standing, grinning Dolores Umbridge. Hermione fought back nausea. She thinks she's won this time, thought Hermione. We'll see.

"Gentlemen," she said in greeting as she took her seat, ignoring Umbridge.

"Professor Snape was not invited to this meeting," pointed out Tobler. "But I believe there is another section of the Ministry that is most interested in hearing from him."

"He is here at my request," said Hermione, "just as I assume Undersecretary Umbridge is here at yours. I'm very busy, gentlemen, so I would appreciate it if we could get down to business quickly."

"Your workload is about to be greatly reduced," said Tobler solemnly. "We have unanimously decided to relieve you as Hogwarts headmistress. Undersecretary Umbridge will take over for you, effective immediately."

Snape said it so Hermione wouldn't have to. "That is unacceptable."

A few governors gaped at Snape's insolence. "That is our decision, and you must respect it," retorted an irritated Tobler.

"You may or may not know," said Hermione, "that Undersecretary Umbridge created a great deal of ill will at Hogwarts during her previous time there. I read to you a statement signed by all current Hogwarts professors, saying, 'We strongly feel that Dolores Umbridge is highly inappropriate to be at Hogwarts in any capacity. She—'"

"Professor Granger, we are not here to—"

"—six years ago behaved in a petty, abusive, and tyrannical fashion, to such an extent that all professors considered resigning at some point. We simply could not continue to function as professors if she were to be returned to Hogwarts, and we would make this clear to the public, and students' parents, in the strongest possible terms."

"They can be replaced," said Umbridge cheerfully.

"Very quickly, no doubt," agreed Snape, "since as a professor, you did nothing but have the students read during classes. It should not be difficult for you to find a dozen others who would do the same."

"That is the kind of 'education' she would bring to Hogwarts," added Hermione.

"I was operating under the instructions of then-Minister Fudge, who has since been assassinated by... persons unknown," said Umbridge smugly, looking directly at Snape.

"You would be well-advised to beware of 'persons unknown,'" retorted Snape. Her eyes widened slightly at the none-too-subtle threat.

Hermione spoke again. "Our point, gentlemen, is that Undersecretary Umbridge simply cannot function effectively as a Hogwarts instructor or headmistress. However—"

"I'm in, Granger, and there's nothing you can do about it," said Umbridge contemptuously.

Hermione glared at Umbridge. "You'd be surprised at what I can do. You will never set foot on Hogwarts soil again, I promise you that." Turning to the governors, she added, "And you, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You are supposed to be the overseers of Hogwarts' safety and smooth operation, and you try to install the one person who caused more dissension at Hogwarts than any in a century. You're responding only to political pressure, not what's best for Hogwarts.

"However, I am willing to try to reach a compromise. You have no logical reason to want me out of the position—"

"Hogwarts' centuries-old magical protection was destroyed under your supervision!" exclaimed a governor.

Snape eyed him carefully, then responded. "The Ministry has already been informed of the details of what happened. There was nothing she or any headmaster could have done to stop what happened. You are using this as a pretext for a politically motivated decision."

"A headmistress is responsible for what happens at Hogwarts, whether she could have prevented it or not," responded Tobler coldly. "Headmaster Dumbledore said that many times."

"Yes, and that is why I am willing to try to reach a compromise," agreed Hermione. "I will step aside voluntarily

if you name any of the other current professors to be the headmaster."

"That is unacceptable," retorted Tobler. "We are the governors, and it is our decision."

"And may I ask," said Snape, turning a penetrating eye on Tobler, "what you were promised by Undersecretary Trent in exchange for this appointment?"

Tobler reddened. "I will not answer such insolent questions!"

"Because you know I am a Legilimens, and would detect your lie in response," shot back Snape. "If you tell me that you are not doing this on behalf of Undersecretary Trent, or in exchange for some favor from him, we will cease our resistance. Please, go ahead," he added with sarcasm.

There was silence; Tobler tried to keep a straight face, but his expression betrayed his feelings. "As I thought," spat Snape. "We will..." He paused, and looked down the table at the other man who had spoken. "What is your name?"

"Wilbert Trafain," responded the man defensively.

"Yes, a good friend of Undersecretary Trent, I believe," said Snape. "But you are not a Hogwarts governor."

"Of course he is," responded Tobler.

"When was he appointed?"

"This morning, in the wake of Governor Wyatt's assassination last Friday."

Snape grinned. "By whom was he appointed?"

Tobler's face fell, as he saw where Snape was going. "By the appropriate authority."

"Do not lie to a Legilimens," said Snape disdainfully. "You mean, he was appointed by Undersecretary Trent, who does not have the authority to do so. All eleven undersecretaries must agree for Ministerial power to be used, and I am certain that Undersecretary Weasley would not agree to such a thing."

"Even if you are correct," replied Tobler, trying to recover, "The vote to remove Professor Granger was still unanimous, and is valid."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Again, a lie. It is not valid. You cannot make decisions without the unanimous agreement of all twelve governors, and you do not have that. You can make no decisions until you have your twelfth member, legitimately appointed."

"How dare you take advantage of Governor Wyatt's death in such a despicable way," hissed Umbridge, feigning outrage. "You may well have been his killer, for all we know, trying to prevent my installation."

Snape grinned again. "You are welcome to try to prove it."

"Believe me, I will," she shouted.

"I think not." Turning to Hermione, he said, "Headmistress, it is clear we are wasting our time—"

Harry suddenly took off from his perch on Hermione's shoulder, flying in the air above her and Snape. "There's been an attack on Hogwarts," Hermione informed Snape anxiously. They grabbed Harry's tail and were gone.

In the hallway outside, under an Invisibility Cloak, Drake and Hugo followed the governors until they could catch one alone. Drake took his memories of the meeting and performed a Memory Charm.

Harry deposited Hermione and Snape in the Great Hall. Sprout was trying to calm everyone down; Hermione could smell smoke, and she saw burn marks on the walls of the Hall. A few people were on the ground near the walls, but she couldn't see who they were. "What happened?" she asked Helen, who ran to her and Snape upon seeing them; Helen had been one of those Hermione chose to keep watch at mealtimes. A few Aurors were behind her.

"A man Apparated in," she reported, "into the middle of the Hall. He had a sort of... I don't know, a kind of tray in each hand, with four Fireballs in it. He shot them all off at once, they went in every direction. It happened really fast. But we were really lucky. Eight of us were keeping watch, and we were kind of spaced apart. Each of us intercepted the Fireball closest to us and flung it at the nearest wall. None of them landed where they were supposed to."

"Was anyone hurt?" asked Hermione.

"A few students got singed," answered an Auror, "and a couple of us happened to Apparate in near the walls. Most of the students managed to swat them away high, and they exploded against the walls."

"Hermione! Over here!" She turned and saw Ron, in his Auror robes, gesture her over. As she got close she saw the Healer, responding quickly, treating Neville for burns to the side of his head.

"Neville!" she cried, taking his free hand.

"I'm all right, it's not as bad as it looks," he assured her. "Just got a bit of a surprise when I Apparated in, is all."

Hermione looked at the Healer, who nodded. "Some bleeding and burns, but nothing that can't be fixed quickly. He probably won't have to spend the night at St. Mungo's."

"Damn right I won't," Neville shot back. "Give me a break, I should be out of there in two hours and back on duty."

"They'll be the judge of that," said Hermione firmly. "I don't want you giving them a hard time, or I'll hear about it."

"I'm not making any promises."

Hermione leaned close to him. "I have to do headmistress stuff, but I'll be checking in on you." She kissed him on his uninjured cheek, and went to check on the rest of the damage and confer with Kingsley, who had already arrived.

"I suppose there's nothing we can do to stop this," she said.

He shook his head. "Nothing more than what you did, which definitely saved some lives."

"I'm sure it'll be duly noted in the Prophet," she said sarcastically.

"I'll mention it if they ask me. Were you at the Ministry when this happened?"

She nodded. "Resisting Umbridge. Professor Snape got us off on a technicality, but come Friday, we're..."

He gave her a small, sympathetic grin. "I believe the technical term is 'screwed.'"

She smiled a little. "I don't like to use words like that. But yes, we're screwed."

He tilted his head and gave a tiny shrug. "You never know what will happen."

"I don't have much hope. But thanks for the encouragement, and for arriving so fast. I assume you have four Aurors on fast Apparation-detection response for Hogwarts?"

"It's as much as we can spare. But fortunately, it seems as though you have some capable people here."

"Well, their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was Harry Potter," she said humorously. "They should be good."

He nodded. "I didn't want him to be a teacher way back when; I'm sure you remember that we wanted him as an Auror. But we've been getting much better applicants from here since he's been the teacher. That Dumbledore, always seemed to know what he was doing."

"I wish he were here," said Hermione wistfully.

He gave her shoulder a quick pat. "You're doing great. Just don't let the bastards get you down."

"Which bastards would those be?" she asked, deadpan.

"Any of them," he said emphatically.

An hour later, Kingsley requested an emergency meeting of the undersecretaries. Fifteen minutes later, all were present except Umbridge. Trent told Kingsley to go ahead and start; she could be filled in later. Kingsley assumed that it was partly because he knew that she would vote as he did, whatever the situation.

"I'm here to request authority that only the Minister can give," said Kingsley. "The Aurors would like it made a criminal offense to Apparate into Hogwarts, until further notice. As word has gotten out, three parents of students have already Apparated to the school grounds, which keeps us distracted. If an attack occurred soon after that, lives could be lost. I'd like to see this in the Prophet tomorrow, so people will know. Time is of the essence."

The other undersecretaries let Trent speak first. "Well, that certainly sounds reasonable," offered Trent. "Would you give us a moment to discuss this, Mr. Shackbolt?" Kingsley nodded and left.

"Arthur? You're the contrary one these days. What do you think?"

"My vote's the most predictable of this group, Roger, you know that. Of course I'll support it. I assume this is something we can all agree on?"

"I'm not sure," responded Trent. "I'm still concerned about Hogwarts' leadership. So I'll tell you what, I'll support this if you'll support the installation of Wilbert Trafain as the twelfth Hogwarts governor."

Now I know why he wanted Kingsley to leave the room, thought Arthur disgustedly. Allowing his annoyance to show clearly, he said, "The fact that I don't have political ambition, Roger, doesn't mean that I'm stupid. You know I don't make quid pro quo deals. But, how about this: you support this now without any further argument, and I won't go to the Prophet and tell them that you tried to hold Hogwarts' security hostage to your political agenda."

Trent chuckled and shrugged. "Page five, at best. 'Political Infighting At Ministry.' People will be so shocked. If they

even read it."

"Suit yourself. You'll support it, though. You don't want to be blamed for the next Hogwarts death that could have been prevented."

"I'm pretty sure that blame will be Granger's, not mine," retorted Trent. "After how she and Snape talked to the governors, she'll be persona non grata at the Ministry. I don't see why I should help her. But that gives me an idea. I'll—and I'm serious about this—do it if and only if Snape testifies about where he was on Sunday morning."

Arthur tried to keep his temper down. "You're jeopardizing lives."

Trent gave him a steely glare. "I'm making a point. I'm going to be Minister in four days. I'm serving notice that I'm not to be messed with. Hogwarts doesn't matter anyway; on Friday Granger is gone, and Hogwarts will be in lockstep with the Ministry."

"With you, you mean," clarified Arthur.

"Same thing. The Minister has quite a lot of power, and I intend to use it. I'm not going to sit idly by and let Granger and Snape defy me just because I won't be Minister for another four days. So, you go to the Prophet and say what you want. In fact, I'll be supporting it as well."

Arthur rolled his eyes, knowing what was coming. "I, however, have some concerns about it," said Undersecretary Peter Sampson, as if on cue.

"I do, too," added another. Arthur sighed; they would do Trent the favor of blocking it on his behalf, while he would be able to say publicly that he supported it.

"If you think this is going to fool anybody—" Arthur started, but was interrupted by an aide of Trent's. "Excuse me for interrupting, but... we were just looking for Undersecretary Umbridge, and we found her. She's dead."

Arthur saw that the startled glances were as much in fear for their own safety as in concern for Umbridge. "From what?" asked Trent sharply.

"They don't know yet," said the aide. "Not the Killing Curse, not any organ failure. They think right now it's poison, but they still have to test her. I'll find out what I can." The young man retreated.

The silence in the room stretched to a full minute. Finally, Trent spoke. "If it turns out to be poison... the Potions Master who not long ago as much as threatened her life looks very good for this. The Wizengamot might even convict him on circumstantial evidence. I have no doubt that he did it."

"People have been dying left and right for a week now," pointed out Arthur.

"A perfect setting in which to kill an enemy and make it look like someone else did it," countered Trent. "He threatened her specifically, Tobler said. I'm sure he'll show us the memory in a Pensieve if we ask him to. Mark my words, Snape will be in custody by Friday."

"And you don't care that more than anyone except Harry, he brought down Voldemort."

"Once a Dark wizard, always a Dark wizard. They don't change their spots."

Arthur shook his head. This was very soon going to be a government he wanted no part of. He wanted to resign, but

he knew he should stay, if only to keep Trent honest and maybe help curb the worst abuses the man might be tempted to commit.

After another silence, Trent looked at Arthur. "Well, Arthur, your obstruction has paid off. No Minister to appoint another Undersecretary, and we can do nothing without eleven votes. The government is paralyzed until Friday. Happy?"

"This wasn't what I had in mind," said Arthur evenly. "But better paralyzed than corrupt."

Trent's eyes narrowed. "That's an awfully heavy word to be throwing around."

Arthur was unmoved. "This from a man who was ready to sacrifice lives to his political agenda. I'm comfortable with the word."

"'Corrupt' means 'illegal.' I'd like you to point to one illegal thing I did."

"You tried to slide Wilbert Trafain past Hermione and hope no one noticed; that's illegal, appointing someone without proper authority. But I'll compromise. Perhaps you'd prefer the term 'morally bankrupt.' There's no law against that."

Trent actually smiled. "To a lot of people, that's the definition of politics. You make me laugh sometimes, Arthur. You couldn't be less appropriate for this job."

"At last," nodded Arthur, "we agree on something."

Fortunately, Luna had Apparation privileges for Harry's home; he wasn't around as a human, and Ginny didn't have the magical ability to alter any of Harry's magical

protections for their home. She walked out of the Apparation area; Ginny was in the living room, waiting for her.

Ginny was going to give Luna a quick hug in greeting, but Luna took Ginny in her arms and held her tightly, her sympathy for what Ginny had recently endured coming back to her. Ginny smiled and returned the hug; Luna was always unconventional. "It's all right," Ginny assured her. "I'm okay."

"I know," said Luna as they separated. "I just had a flashback."

"It was awful," acknowledged Ginny. "But it's over now. James is safe, thank God."

"Thank God?" repeated Luna.

"It's a Muggle expression," explained Ginny. "I picked it up from Harry. He won't say 'thank Merlin,' he thinks it sounds stupid for some reason."

"Well, he is more powerful than Merlin was," said Luna reasonably. "Maybe someday wizards will say, 'Thank Harry.'"

Ginny burst out laughing. "I'd love to see his reaction to that," she said as her laughter died down. "I hope you'll say that again sometime when he's around, as a human."

"I'll try," agreed Luna. "How are you doing, if I can ask? With him not around?"

"He's around sometimes as a phoenix, of course. It's not the same, but it's better than nothing. He's been around less since Hogwarts came under attack, but I know why, and I'm not bothered. He and the others are really busy these days. I am too, just doing something different; making sure James is

safe. This house is safe, and James is not leaving it until Harry comes back as a human. Speaking of James..."

James toddled over, and Luna picked him up, holding him slightly away from her. "Remember me?"

"Oona!"

Luna smiled, and held James to her. "That's right," she said. She thought of how close he had come to dying, a death she could have prevented but didn't. "I'm so glad you're all right."

Ginny noticed the tears just behind Luna's eyes. "I guess it was kind of emotional for the rest of you who were there, too," she suggested.

Luna nodded. "I might have also been thinking about my father. You almost lost James, and I almost lost him. In the dragon attack," she added, to Ginny's surprised expression. "He was in the group that was almost killed at the end."

"Ah, that Susan saved."

Luna hated to perpetuate a lie of her own making, but she had little choice. "That's right. I was terrified. And I was terrified for you, when this happened."

"So was I, as everyone in the wizarding parts of England knows by now, since they saw the whole thing on those Looking Glasses. I assume that's why the Prophet wanted you to do this article?"

Luna nodded. "Everyone saw James bring up the shield, but people aren't sure how it was done. I mean, it was mentioned briefly in the article the next day, but it's such a stunning development, it deserves its own article. I was just

surprised they asked me to do it, since I'm so new. I guess all their other reporters are busy doing other things."

Ginny, at least, knew why. "No, it's because of me. I don't have the ability to authorize anyone new for the fireplace or Apparation, not that I would anyway. And I refuse to leave here. So, whoever they sent to interview me had to be someone already authorized to Apparate here."

"Ah, now I understand," said Luna. Instead of putting James down on the floor, she sat on the floor with him. "So, James, show me what you can do."

James cheerfully started changing colors on blocks and other toys. "He's been going nuts changing everything's color," said an amused Ginny. "Fortunately it's harmless, and it doesn't last long. I got him some crayons and coloring books. Color is a big world for him now. He's actually getting creative with the colors he turns things. Right now he likes orange and gold, because those are Harry's phoenix colors."

"Does he miss Harry?"

"Well, of course, he's bonded to Harry now, so he can feel his presence. But even before that, if Harry was around as a phoenix, that was all right for James. Oddly—at least, I think it's odd—he doesn't really make a distinction between phoenix-daddy and human-daddy. Wish I could do that."

"When I was over for dinner, you said that you were working on some things, like Summoning things. Can he Summon yet?"

"Summa!" shouted James, but he didn't Summon anything.

"Don't encourage him," joked Ginny. "Once he can do that, he'll be Summoning anything that isn't nailed down. It'll be

a full-time job keeping up with him." She paused, then added thoughtfully, "A full-time job that I'm suddenly more than happy to do." She paused again. "Now that this has happened, I don't think I'm even going to miss professional Quidditch. Almost losing him reminded me of how precious he is. I think I just took it for granted before. Now I wonder how I did."

Luna thought she could imagine how it could happen. "How are you getting along without Dobby?"

Emotion crossed Ginny's face. "We miss him, of course. I told James that Dobby had to go, he went to a good place. Which is true. He's probably dealing with it better, the whole experience, because of being bonded with Harry, and having that influence that you get from a phoenix. I don't think that a day's going to go by for a long time when I don't think about what Dobby did. It's the noblest thing anyone can do. I was glad Hermione had that memorial at Hogwarts for him, it was a good reminder. Dobby was a better person than a lot of humans.

"As for his helping around the house, Mum's really stepped in there, which I appreciate. She's doing all the shopping, which makes me kind of paranoid; I worry that anything she touches could be a Portkey. I make her promise not to grab anything, just to Summon things, or do a Reveal spell that would show a Portkey. So far, I haven't let her go shopping unless Harry can escort her, on her shoulder. I still worry, but someone has to get the food and things like that. I'm also having Mum teach me more household spells. We'll get by."

Luna asked more questions about James' upbringing and magical abilities, and soon had enough information for her article. Ginny asked Luna to stay for dinner, which Luna did.

She could always stop time later for as long as it took to write the article.

Dinner turned out to be a rather larger affair than Ginny had thought. Since James' abduction, all Weasley family meals had been eaten at Harry's home, since Ginny wouldn't go to the Burrow despite the fact that it too was under the influence of Harry's spells. Usually it was Arthur, Molly, Ginny, James, and Ron and Pansy if they weren't too busy. That night it was them, Luna, Hermione, and to Ginny's surprise, Snape. Hermione had suggested to Snape that he join them so they could talk freely to Arthur about the Hogwarts situation vis-à-vis the Ministry. Pansy helped Molly in the kitchen, despite Ginny's offers to do so.

Snape and Hermione arrived at the same time, taking Flora from Hogwarts. "Hermione," Ginny greeted her. "Professor Snape."

He gave her a slight nod, noting that she wasn't going to address him in familiar terms in front of others. All except Molly and Pansy sat in the living room; James was napping in his bedroom. "Well, it was an extremely eventful day at the office," remarked Arthur. "Professor, I heard you made a few new friends among the governors."

Hermione chuckled. "It was quite a performance. He treated them like Potions students who hadn't studied, then tried to cheat on a test. Of course, they deserved it. He saved us, at least for a few days. I was happy to take what I could get. I hated the idea of Umbridge being in charge at all, never mind with the magic down. Of course, whoever he appoints now will probably be just as bad."

"I assume you know, Professor, that he intends to arrest you for Umbridge's murder as soon as he's Minister," said Arthur.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "In that case, I only wish I had actually done it."

"Professor!" shouted Molly from the kitchen, in a reprimanding tone. "That's nothing to make jokes about!"

Arthur, Ron, and Ginny chuckled. With a sardonic glance towards the kitchen, Snape continued. "I made threatening comments to her in the governors' meeting to give her pause, to unnerve her. Now, in retrospect, it appears to have been... imprudent. But making threats is not a crime, and I have excellent alibis for the early afternoon. Trent will attempt to ignore that, but I doubt very strongly that the Wizengamot would convict me with such an absence of evidence. I suspect the killer was our adversary, who procured a memory of the meeting and decided to place a further wedge between Hogwarts and the Ministry. Rest assured, I am not in the least worried about Trent's plans for me."

"And if they do convict you, Harry can always break you out," pointed out Ron with a straight face.

Snape gave Ron an annoyed, 'very funny' glance. "I am, however, concerned for the future of Hogwarts. It appears that on Friday Professor Granger and I will be gone, and the school controlled by Trent."

Hermione shook her head, distressed. "I hate that this happened on my watch. I should have stepped aside at the beginning, handed it over to Professor Sprout. They wouldn't have done this to her."

"Yes, they would," countered Snape. "The elimination of Hogwarts' magical protection would have been their pretext. It would have been something along the lines of, 'such a nice woman, but not up to the challenge of ensuring the

safety of the school.' Your youth is part of their pretext, but as you pointed out to them, you have far more experience in dangerous situations than most. They would not have dared do this to Professor Potter, but as we have seen, his political clout is only somewhat transferable to you. There is nothing you have done that you should have done differently, and no reason for self-recrimination."

She nodded her appreciation, but couldn't help but remember Hedrick and Helen's request to check their classmates. She was sure her having done so would have prevented the loss of Hogwarts' magic, and prevented a death.

"I wish there were something I could do, but of course there isn't," said Arthur.

"So, Amelia Bones won't take him on?" asked Ron. "You said she doesn't like him. And after what Susan did, her name would be important; the Aurors would support her—"

"Aurors can't get involved in politics, Ron, you know that."

"I mean, in a subtle way," countered Ron. "The Aurors are all talking about how bad things are going to be with Trent, how Kingsley is going to have to spend half his time fighting off Trent's interference. We all wish Amelia would run. We could let it be known that we support her."

"She's still grieving Susan, she'd want no part of that," said Arthur. "I don't blame her. Trent has a lot of popular support, and he'd be an ugly campaigner. I've seen firsthand the depths to which he'll stoop. It would be a very uphill battle for her. She just isn't in any condition to take it on."

Ron nodded. "Well, there are other things we could do," he muttered darkly.

"I strongly suggest, Mr. Weasley," said Snape sternly, "that you not say such things outside the presence of Aurors. I doubt Mr. Shacklebolt would appreciate it."

Ron was taken aback. "I trust everyone here."

"That is not the point; it is more a matter of principle," countered Snape.

Luna spoke. "I promise not to repeat this, of course, but I assume Ron is talking about the Aurors killing Trent?"

"An appealing option on the surface, I admit," responded Snape, who then glanced in the direction of the kitchen, as if wondering whether he'd been heard; most of the others smiled. "But, yes, such a thing has happened before. It is a reason for the Aurors' independent power base. The Aurors protect the Minister, which means they could easily kill him and make it appear to be natural causes, or an accident. Because of this, an understanding has evolved in which the Aurors take orders from the Minister and do not involve themselves in politics, but he does not interfere in their internal affairs. This has been the case for over a hundred years."

"It's gotten around that Trent told Kingsley that he may not respect that agreement," said Ron. "There's been some internal discussion about what to do about it."

"That doesn't surprise me at all, that he wouldn't respect the agreement," said Arthur. "Trent is, I suppose, what politics can breed. He's not evil, or even necessarily a bad person fundamentally. But he doesn't care about being a good undersecretary or Minister, just about power. He's the type that'll push hard in every direction, and keep pushing until he encounters resistance he can't get past. There's no such thing as a gentlemen's agreement with someone like him."

So, it doesn't surprise me that he would push Kingsley hard, even before he becomes Minister."

"I just thought that all that stuff he was saying about giving the Aurors better direction was political, that he didn't really mean it," said Luna. "By the way, do you think there's any possibility that he's connected to our enemy? He had benefited from what's happened, especially what happened to Minister Bright."

"There is no way to know," said Snape, "but some things then do not make sense, such as Umbridge's assassination. He would not remove a key supporter simply to discredit me or Professor Granger. I would say that he has been an unwitting beneficiary. To the extent that our enemy has a motive, it would seem to be to create the greatest possible terror, chaos, and anxiety in government institutions, Hogwarts, and the population. Trent is simply the kind of person who benefits from such a situation."

Molly called everyone in for dinner, and they talked more while they ate, mostly catching up those who didn't know, such as Ginny, on the latest developments with Hogwarts, the Aurors, and the Ministry. After dinner, Luna excused herself, saying she had to go home to write the article about James. She knew that while she could stop time to write it at her leisure, it would look very suspicious to the others if she stayed until minutes from the Prophet's deadline and yet submitted the article on time.

They reconvened in the living room to discuss the near future. "What hurts about this worst is the loss of Hogwarts," lamented Hermione. "The Aurors can take care of themselves, but Hogwarts is about to become a division of the Ministry, and nobody will care enough to do anything about it."

"Unfortunately, some will welcome it," said Arthur. "Some people have always said that Hogwarts should be more responsive to the citizens, and making it part of the Ministry—they say, I don't agree—would have that effect. Having seen politics up close, I know what it would do, but most people don't. It probably won't be like Umbridge having students read instead of teaching them, but in some ways it will be like Umbridge writ large. Teachers will become the equivalent of politicians, their political acumen and connections more important than their teaching skill."

"In Muggle schools, they have tenure," pointed out Hermione. "They can't fire teachers for anything but the most extreme misbehavior. Why don't we have that at Hogwarts?"

"It has never been necessary," suggested Snape.

"That reminds me, why has this never happened before?" asked Ron. "Hasn't the Ministry ever tried to take over Hogwarts before?"

Snape exchanged a glance with Hermione. He would take the question; he was better at lying than she was. "There have been times when the Ministry's influence was much stronger than it has been recently. We have been living in a period of strong independence for Hogwarts, mainly due to Professor Dumbledore's influence. Such things ebb and flow, but I do not believe such a direct takeover has ever been accomplished."

Ron was about to comment further when Harry suddenly appeared; he flew around a little, and perched on Snape's shoulder. Ginny and a few others laughed as Snape glanced up, annoyed. "You are ten seconds from being swatted away, Professor," warned Snape. Harry immediately took flight

again, this time landing on Ginny's shoulder. She reached up and pet him.

"Looks like he found the right place," joked Molly.

"Wait a second, he's sending something," said Pansy; Hermione nodded that she was receiving impressions as well. The others saw identical expressions of stunned surprise appear on the faces of the two phoenix companions.

"What is it?" asked Molly, the others appearing very curious as well.

"It's his phoenix intuition," said Hermione. She turned to Arthur, sadness on her face. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I know you're not going to like this..."

The next morning, Hedrick and Helen finished eating early. Before the Hogwarts attack, they had been eating alone because the other eight wanted nothing to do with them. Now, it was because they were the only two remaining Slytherin seventh years at Hogwarts. One was dead, and the other seven, at St. Mungo's.

They had received blanket permission from Hermione to walk out the Hogwarts gate and Apparate to St. Mungo's to visit, provided their Head Boy and Girl responsibilities had been taken care of. Ten students were on breakfast watch in the Great Hall; it was an even more desired post after the quick reactions of the eight had saved many lives the day before. Hedrick and Helen were scheduled for the dinner watch.

They had no classes until ten o'clock, so there was no hurry. They Apparated to the St. Mungo's lobby, then took the elevator to where their friends were being kept. They walked in and saw a Healer checking one; they had been hoping for

Pansy, but they knew she couldn't specifically request to care for patients based on her personal connection to them. They knew this Healer, having seen her the morning before.

She looked up and saw them. "Hedrick, Helen. No change, I'm afraid."

They nodded, having expected nothing different. "Still no way to tell if anything will happen?" asked Hedrick.

"I'm sorry, no," said the Healer, and walked off to check on other patients.

Helen took his hand. "It could be a while. I think it's like what happened to Professor Potter and his friends when they saved him from that Killing Curse in Hogsmeade six years ago. They'll come back when they come back."

"Damn artifact," he muttered. "I just can't believe that one of the ten of us is dead. It just seems... wrong. We were supposed to be friends for life, all of us."

"I know. It's really hard," she agreed. "Just think of how they'll feel when they wake up. Professor Snape said the pyramids weren't actually controlling them, but really influencing them. They kind of couldn't help what they did, but they'll feel bad anyway. They'll feel responsible for Derek's death. We have to tell them that they're not."

A few minutes later, the door to the ward opened, and Colin and Dennis Creevey came in. They exchanged greetings and what little news there was. Colin had to go to the Ministry, but Dennis stayed for a while.

Colin walked into the Muggle Liaison office at eight-thirty. Dudley asked about Andrea; Colin said there was no change. They sat at their computers and got to work. Luna joined

them at nine o'clock; they complimented her on her article about James.

At just after half past nine, Dudley gasped. "Jesus Christ," he whispered.

"What?" asked Colin and Luna simultaneously.

"Go get Arthur, now," said Dudley urgently.

"He's in a meeting with the undersecretaries—"

"Go in and pull him out of it!"

Luna had gotten up and walked around behind Dudley's desk, and saw what he was looking at. "Oh, no..."

Convinced of the urgency, Colin leaped up, but had to know what it was first. He joined Luna behind Dudley, and saw a picture with a caption. "Find Of The Century, Or Digital Trickery? You Decide!" Below it was a picture, taken from the air, of Hogwarts castle.

On his way out, Colin almost ran over a colleague who was entering the office.

Drake had not given Joe the artifact that prevented magic from being detected for yesterday's attack with the Fireballs; it hadn't been necessary, and he had wanted to test the Aurors' reaction time. Today, it was necessary.

He and Joe had Apparated together into Hogwarts castle, and fortunately, were not seen on entry. Wanting greater freedom of movement, Drake had decided not to use the Invisibility Cloak, but to Disillusion himself and Joe instead. They could still be seen, especially when in motion, but one had to be looking carefully. They were looking for people

alone, but so far hadn't found any; Drake decided he would settle for groups of two. They were handicapped by the fact that at Hogwarts, one had to assume that anyone could use the Killing Curse shield.

They turned a corner, and Drake finally saw what he was after: one person standing alone. Better yet, it was the Muggle Studies teacher, a Muggle himself. Drake crept closer.

"I do not require two students to help me check that a lavatory is empty," muttered a disgruntled Snape as he entered a men's room, two Hufflepuff sixth years behind him.

"You know the rule, Professor," John chided him from where he stood outside, checking the halls. "No one goes into a room alone until they know it's not occupied. I've seen you reminding a number of students."

"Yes, but I can look after myself far better than they can look after themselves," retorted Snape. Satisfied that the men's room was empty, Snape waved the two students away, and they headed for the door to rejoin John outside. Snape and the other two had come to accompany John from his class; Snape was discovering that great logistical planning was required to be sure that no one was alone at any time, even walking from class to class.

Chuckling to himself at Snape's annoyance, John checked the halls again. There was nothing... but something looked strange, like the air was rippling. As the two students stepped out of the men's room, John's heart raced as he saw a Killing Curse bolt suddenly head towards him from four yards away.

John knew exactly what wizards did to bring up the Killing Curse shield, and without the time to think about it, or anything, he did just that, like a reflex. The green shield went up, and the bolt was stopped. John stood there, bewildered; the students saw the shield go up and fired Stunning spells blindly. They all heard the sounds of two Disapparations as Snape raced out of the men's room. "What happened?"

"Someone shot a Killing Curse at me," said John.

Snape glanced at the students, both of whom could use the shield. "Did you put it up?" one asked the other, who shook his head.

"Clearly one of you did it," Snape pointed out. "As Professor Potter has explained, it can at times seem to come on automatically; either of you could have done it and not been aware of it. To the Hall, and quickly. They may not be truly gone, and the school must be warned. You two in front, I will watch our backs." They set off at a trot as Snape spoke into his pendant, informing Hermione of what had happened.

John thought furiously as they ran. He knew that it was him, not the students. He had been taking part in the energy of love classes for over three months; some students had developed the ability to use the spells that quickly. Of course, he was a Muggle, and took the class mainly for self-improvement reasons (though he had thought humorously, on occasion, wouldn't it be interesting if I became able to do the spells). As he jogged he moved his arm out from under his sleeve to do a quick test. He focused on the white cuff of the sleeve, and it suddenly turned blue at his behest.

So, he thought, this confirms one of Harry's discoveries: people can do magic without wands, not only him. Of course

his son did, but Harry was helping him. He did another test, and decided to stop time for everyone except him. It didn't work. Okay, he thought, so I can't do what Harry can, but I can use magic, even the energy-of-love spells, without a wand. The next step is to check my genealogy, make sure there are no wizards in my family tree. But I'm almost sure there aren't. If not, then this means...

A chill went up his spine as the realization hit him: any Muggle could become a wizard. What he had just discovered could have a profound impact on human society, on the history of the human race. He quickly decided that for the time being, he would tell no one except his wife. He had to think about this carefully. He could imagine that the knowledge could benefit humanity greatly... but he could also imagine that it could spark bloody conflicts and power struggles. Even though the energy of love could not be wielded by one who sought to use it to destroy, it could inspire great jealousy in those who found it difficult to acquire. He wondered what in the world he would do.

Ten minutes after Colin had hurriedly left the Muggle Liaison office, Arthur hurried in, Colin close behind. Dudley switched the browser to the page with the picture and quickly got up, allowing Arthur to sit down. Luna stood off to the side, watching.

Arthur cringed at the picture. "Bloody hell..."

Colin shook his head unhappily. "It should have occurred to us that with its magic down, Hogwarts' Muggle-repelling charms would be gone as well, and could be seen by Muggles now. This time has been so hectic..."

"Better late than never," said Arthur gamely. "Nice catch, Dudley. Now, on to what we can do, which is not a lot. I have

to get to Hogwarts, talk to both Hermione and the Aurors. I'll just Apparate in, that'll bring the Aurors. There's no time to lose." He Disapparated; their office was one of the many in the Ministry from which one could Disapparate from but not Apparate to.

"I'm going to check something," said Luna quickly. "See you boys later." She too Disapparated.

Arthur appeared in the Great Hall near the teachers' table; the first thing he noticed was that there were immediately about fifteen wands pointed at him. He quickly raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Whoa, whoa."

Four Aurors Apparated in, one of which was Ron; they quickly saw the culprit by the direction in which the wands were pointed. "Dad?"

"Ron, get Kingsley *now*. It's an emergency."

As Ron followed his father's request, Arthur considered how to find Hermione and Snape, but fortunately, they ran into the Hall just then. "Arthur!" exclaimed a surprised Hermione. "Did you just Apparate in here? We just had an attack!"

"I didn't know that," said Arthur quickly. Kingsley Apparated in and asked, "Arthur, what's going on?"

"There's a picture of Hogwarts in one of this morning's Muggle newspapers," he said.

Hermione went pale. "Oh, my God, we should have thought of that."

"Not that it would have done any good," said Arthur. "Kingsley, what are the chances of hiding Hogwarts from further observation at this point?"

"Zero," replied Kingsley grimly.

Snape nodded his agreement. "It would take days of spellwork from expert and powerful wizards."

"Another plane's going to come here at some point if they saw the picture in the paper," said Hermione anxiously. "I've just asked Harry to—oh, no... I asked Harry to fly around and have a look. He says there's a small plane heading this way, only a few miles out. I can have Harry take me into the plane —"

"It would have to be me," said Snape, "for the Imperius Curse would have to be performed to make them turn around; since this is their objective, a Suggestion charm would not be enough. I submit, however, that it would merely postpone the inevitable. More would come, and the more we sent back, the greater numbers would come after that."

"We have to *do* something!" Hermione almost shouted. "The wizarding world is about to be exposed!"

"For all practical purposes, it already has been," said Snape calmly. "It is now not a question of if, but of when."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but froze; she was suddenly as still as a Muggle picture, mouth half-open. Arthur, Kingsley... Snape's eyes went wide as everyone around him suddenly stopped moving, or doing anything. Just as he was registering this, he heard a voice behind him.

"Professor Snape," said Luna. "I need to talk to you."

Snape whirled around to look at her. Her voice was calm, and her eyes showed none of her usual irreverence; she was serious, even grim. He had never seen her look anything like

that before. Glancing around again at the frozen figures, Snape instantly understood what was happening.

"I assure you, Miss Lovegood, that you have my undivided attention."

A hint of amusement came back to her eyes, but only for a second. "I suppose I would have to, there's not much to pay attention to."

He nodded. "I gather that your travels to Tibet did you quite a lot of good."

She chuckled lightly, but not humorously. "I'm not quite sure that 'good' is the word I would use to describe it."

"You would prefer not to have this power."

"I've seen how Harry has suffered."

"Yes, he has," agreed Snape quietly.

She looked down unhappily. "I'm not looking forward to telling him that I could have saved his son's life, but didn't."

"He has the same burden you now do, he knows the dangers of going too far," said Snape, with a hint of compassion.

"Especially since his son lived, I think he will find it within him to understand." Glancing around again, he added, "I gather, however, that you find the exposure of the wizarding world unacceptable, warranting your interference."

She nodded. "I've been following your conversation from outside the Hogwarts gate. I told myself I wouldn't use this power to go around saving people. I didn't save James, even though I would have cried for a day if he had died. But the consequences of this are just huge. Wizards have feared this

for a long time. I couldn't just sit back and let it happen. I tell myself I'm not really saving anyone exactly, I'm just preserving the status quo. I'm probably fooling myself, but..."

"To say that is not for me to judge would be putting it mildly," said Snape. "I admit I am not displeased that you have chosen to act. What exactly do you plan to do?"

"I could send that plane home in a flash, make them forget they ever saw that photo, but I know that's only part of it. That picture's in the paper, a million Muggles have seen it. There's nothing I can do about that. The only reason it's not a total disaster is that Muggle image manipulation technology makes it possible to fake a picture like that. The only thing I can think of to do is to restore Hogwarts' magical defenses."

"I believe that would be quite sufficient," said Snape with humorous understatement. "If you plan to do that, though, why are you talking to me?"

"The last thing I want is for anyone to know I can do this," she said emphatically. It again struck him how important this was to her; it was usually not in her personality to say anything emphatically. "If I just do that, it'll be clear that there's someone who can do what Harry does, and I'd strongly prefer that even that wasn't known. I want whatever restores Hogwarts' magic to be... plausible. Something there could be another explanation for."

Snape was surprised. "Such as?"

She sighed. "That's what I want your help with. Your knowledge of magic is very good; I was hoping you could come up with something. Just use your imagination, think of

what kind of thing could possibly cause Hogwarts' magic to resume."

"Besides a witch with nearly unlimited magical abilities?"

She almost smiled. "Yes. Besides that."

Snape thought about it. For some reason, his mind turned to that silly scenario written by last year's graduating Ravenclaws that Harry had insisted on showing him. Maybe the Ring of Hogwarts could return the school's magic, he thought sardonically.

"In a situation such as this, the simplest explanation tends to be the best," he said. "I would suggest that the defenses—or the 'outline', if you will, of the magic that created them—are still present, but simply drained of power. Imagine that Hogwarts' defenses are like a glass full of water. The glass was not destroyed; the water was simply drained from it. We will theorize that a previously unknown aspect of Hogwarts' defenses..." He trailed off.

"What is it?"

A rare smile came to Snape's face. "I have a better idea, and it will kill two birds with one stone."

"Did it work?" asked Kingsley.

"As they say, the proof is in the pudding," said Hermione. "Let's go outside and see for ourselves."

"I don't think wizards say that," said Arthur as they walked.

"If you are planning to observe the behavior of the plane, that is unnecessary," pointed out Snape. "You can simply try

to Disapparate. I have tried, and was unsuccessful. Clearly, your restoration of Hogwarts' magic was effective."

They were joined by a Prophet reporter named Jeffrey Atkinson, who had traveled to Hogwarts on hearing that it could be the source of the unmasking of the wizarding world. "Professors, Undersecretary Weasley, Mr. Shacklebolt. Did I hear you say the restoration was successful? What happened?" He fell in step with them as they walked out of the castle entrance.

"As a student, the headmistress was well-known as an obsessive bookworm," said Snape. "She recalled an ancient tome in the restricted section of the library, one that not only never been viewed before, but simply could not be viewed. When one tried to take it off the shelf, it would not move; it would simply say, 'I will be here when you need me.' The headmistress had the inspiration that the book might be necessary somehow, and she was right. She was able to access it and, with some complex spellwork, activate its true function: to restore Hogwarts' magical defenses in an event such as this. Clearly, it has worked." And, he thought, will do much to restore her reputation with the public and the Ministry, which our enemy is trying to destroy.

Now outside, they all looked for the plane. "Fascinating," said Atkinson. "Most remarkable, the things the Hogwarts founders thought of. This book was not labeled in any way?"

"No, it was just blank on the outside," said Hermione, having no idea that the memory of what had just happened had been created and planted into her mind. "Ah, there it is!"

They saw a small plane approach Hogwarts. It flew directly overhead, and continued on its way. "I think that's more evidence," said a clearly relieved Arthur. "We can be pretty

sure that if they had seen Hogwarts, they would have circled, gotten as low as they could, taken film and more pictures, that kind of thing. They wouldn't have just flown right by."

"Does this mean that the wizarding world is safe once more?" asked Atkinson.

"For the moment, but it's still precarious," said Arthur. "The wizards who are disseminating information online posted a picture of Hogwarts on their own, which of course will match the picture in the Sun. Combined with the accumulation of other information, it would be very persuasive. The Sun picture is genuine, and detailed study might prove it, though I'm not sure. As it stands right now, our world is pretty much exposed for anyone who tries to look. The danger now is the tipping point, the one event that causes people to look in large numbers. If they do, I think our secrecy wouldn't last long."

"Excuse me, Undersecretary, but what does 'online' mean?"

Arthur smiled. "If you'll come to the office today, I'll explain it to you. It takes some time, and demonstration is preferable."

"I will, thank you," said the reporter. "Just after I finish up some interviews here. Headmistress, where is that book now? Can I see it?"

"Sorry. I'd like to show it to you, but it disappeared just after I used it. I checked, and it reappeared on the shelf I took it from. It can't be taken down again. Not until this happens again, anyway."

Atkinson nodded. "I suppose that makes sense. May I ask you a few more questions?"

"Okay, but we have to get back to the castle." They started back to the castle; she intended to look at her old Hogwarts map to make sure no one unauthorized was in the castle, but didn't want to tell a reporter about it. "We have to do a thorough search for Portkeys, traps, anything like that. The castle was vulnerable for two days, and from the most recent attack that almost killed John, we know that at least one person or group gained access despite our watching the gates and monitoring Apparation."

"Should we call off afternoon classes?" asked Snape.

"I suppose, much as I hate to," said Hermione. "Safety has to be the first priority. I still don't want people going off by themselves until we know the castle is safe, and the students are getting really tired of that. After all that's happened, they deserve a break. Will you organize the search?"

"Of course," Snape agreed.

Snape's search group was himself, Hedrick, Helen, and two Slytherin sixth years. They went over the Slytherin dormitories and common room first, casting Reveal spells everywhere, particularly on anything that could be picked up. Once that was done, they checked the area near the Slytherin area; each group had been given a specific area to search.

As they were finishing, the four students suddenly froze, and Luna was standing in front of Snape. "Thank you," she said simply.

"Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best," he responded. "I assume you know perfectly well that I will tell no one of your situation."

"I know."

He gave her a searching look. "Why me? Why not Professor Granger, or one of the others? I have never exactly been kind to you."

"That was before you got your Cleansing reversed," she pointed out. Snape noticed that the previously missing sense of whimsy had returned to her eyes. "You're a different person now. But as for why, I don't know exactly. I just had a feeling that you were the best person to ask for help. I haven't been a phoenix yet, but my intuition's still pretty good."

She hesitated, then spoke again. "There's something else, something you're not going to like. Just before I talked to you, I checked your recent thoughts—also Hermione's, and a few others—for any indication that I might have changed something unintentionally by doing what I did. I discovered that it's occurred to you that this means that you can now resist whatever the Ministry might try to do to Hogwarts. That's not what I was trying to do, so I'm going to make sure that if the Ministry try to get in here, they can do it."

Snape's eyebrows rose. She may be powerful, he thought, but she is still young like Harry, and there are things they both don't understand. "If they come in and get through despite Hogwarts' defenses, I will certainly know what happened. But what about the headmistress? How will it be explained to her?"

"I hadn't thought about that," admitted Luna. "I suppose I could just cause her not to think of it."

"So you'll interfere in people's thought processes now?" asked Snape, in a chiding tone. "And what will she say

when, say, Harry asks her why she did not just defy them? Will she say, 'I forgot'? How plausible will that be?"

"Then I'll think of something else," she said, slightly defensively.

Snape kept on the attack. "Let me ask you, why did you not simply re-establish the Muggle-repelling charms on Hogwarts, and leave the rest as it was?"

She became uncomfortable as she began to see his thrust, but answered anyway. "Because it couldn't have been explained. For it not to appear to be someone like me or Harry, it had to be all or nothing."

"Yes," nodded Snape. "You did more than you had to because it led to the consequence you desired for yourself. But there were other consequences as well. Life is very complex, Miss Lovegood. Even with your power, you cannot take an action with many consequences and then pick and choose, saying, 'I like this consequence but I don't like that one, so I'll get rid of it.' You must accept them all. You have done the wizarding world a great service, and I do not criticize your actions. I know you will see this as further reason not to use your power, but if you do, this is something you had better get used to."

She looked down, lost in thought. "Besides, it is hardly an unfavorable consequence," he added. "Surely you did not wish to see someone like Trent controlling Hogwarts. I know you wished your action to remain 'pure', but this was not something you intended. Whether we are greatly powerful or merely ordinary, our actions almost always have unintended consequences. It is a part of life."

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "I hadn't really talked to you since Harry reversed your Cleansing,"

she said. "You're much... wiser than I would have thought."

A small smile came to Snape's face. "As you know, I spent many years regularly viewing Professor Dumbledore's memories. Some wisdom was bound to come through and be absorbed."

"I wish I could have known him better," she said sadly.

"Have you ever seen the book he wrote for Harry?"

"No, I haven't."

"Ask Ginny if you can borrow it," suggested Snape. "It is precious to Harry, so she may hesitate. If she does, tell her it was at my suggestion. You should read it. You need all the help you can get."

"I can't argue with that. Thank you."

He nodded in acknowledgment. She disappeared, and time started again. She thought of telling him that the castle was clear of anything dangerous, as a small thank-you for his help, but decided against it. Who knows what the consequences might be of anything I do, she thought, no matter how small.

Drake received quite a shock when, two hours after his first attempt in which he barely missed killing the Muggle Studies teacher—for which he blamed his own carelessness, he hadn't seen that there was someone behind the man—he attempted to Apparate into Hogwarts and couldn't. Donning an Invisibility Cloak, he took a trip to the Ministry and started scanning people until he found out, and was stunned to discover that Hogwarts had somehow recovered its magical defenses.

He walked around more, being very careful to stay out of everyone's way and to dodge the paper-airplane memos that littered the air. He saw Arthur Weasley, and was tempted to try to catch him alone, but reluctantly decided not to. Drake had to put a Memory Charm on anyone he scanned, and Granger, no doubt having discovered by then that Ron had been compromised, would be checking everyone in their circle regularly. Drake debated whether to kill Weasley as partial payback that he was denied when the house-elf saved Potter's son. He would consider the idea; there was no hurry. But that idea gave him another idea.

He returned to his hideaway, and summoned Hugo. "Can Arthur Weasley use the Killing Curse shield?"

"I don't know," replied Hugo. "If I had to guess, I would guess that he could. I'm sure Harry would have tried to teach him and Molly, and his temperament is right for it."

"What would be the best way to get under Trent's skin right now?"

Hugo winced internally before dismissing the attack of conscience. "Start picking off the undersecretaries. Not Weasley, since he'd be happy about that. Not Bones either, but any of the others."

Drake nodded. "It shouldn't be that hard; they don't have Auror protection." He would begin by ramping up Joe's power; he was still creating chaos in the American wizarding world as well.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 11: Dudley gets a visit from a Muggle military officer who knows about the wizarding world; Harry and Arthur both take highly unexpected actions.

From Chapter 11: There was a mild gasp, then complete silence in the Atrium. Arthur glanced at Trent and saw perhaps the most stunned expression he'd ever seen. Colin and Dudley, also in attendance, looked on, slack-jawed in astonishment.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

"Dudley!" said Arthur jovially as he approached Dudley's desk. "You've helped save the wizarding world from complete exposure. The Ministry thanks you."

Dudley glanced over, not seeing the man behind Arthur. "I kind of doubt it. I thought the Ministry couldn't tie its shoelaces right now."

"Well, that's true," allowed Arthur. "I thank you, anyway."

"I'm sure that Trent will express his appreciation on Friday by sacking me," said Dudley sarcastically. "It'll be at the top of his 'to do' list."

"You're probably right; it'll be great for morale," agreed Arthur. He stepped aside to reveal his companion. "Dudley, this is Jeffrey Atkinson of the Daily Prophet."

Dudley stood and shook his hand. "So, this merits a story?"

"It's part of the overall story, but yes," said Atkinson. "Even after what happened today, with such a clear demonstration of the value of what you do here, you still expect to be sacked?"

"I'm not optimistic," replied Dudley with a shrug. "He resented the extra budget Arthur got to create my position, it's no secret around here that he makes cracks to his aides about it fairly often. Once he's Minister, he can do what he wants. He also thinks that, as a Muggle, I shouldn't be here anyway. Arthur thinks I have value for my Muggle

experience, but Trent's attitude is that Muggle-born wizards could be, and should be, doing this job."

"I think someone who's never lived in the wizarding world brings a different and valuable perspective to the job," explained Arthur to Atkinson.

"Trent, of course, wouldn't look at it that way," added Dudley. "He just thinks it's nepotism, since it would be if it were him doing it."

Colin spoke up from the other side of the desk. "I, on the other hand, think Undersecretary Trent is a great and farsighted leader."

Arthur and Dudley laughed. "He means, he hopes not to be fired on Friday," explained Dudley.

"Yes, I gathered that," said a smiling Atkinson. Colin introduced himself, and they shook hands. "Why aren't they having Luna do this article?" asked Colin. "She's been with us all this time."

"I'll talk to her later, get her input on this department," said Atkinson. "But she's very junior, not even a regular staff member, so they wouldn't assign her to a big story like this."

"I guess Colin's thinking that she knows how this works, since she's been here all this time," said Dudley. "But the more people know about this, the better. Pull up a chair." Dudley spent the next hour explaining the internet and its connection to the current fragile state of the anonymity of the wizarding world.

Later that evening, Dudley was having his biweekly visit for dinner with his parents. He and his father were sitting at the kitchen table; his mother was cooking and talking up a girl,

a daughter of a friend. Naturally, his parents' main concern was her parents' income and social status, while Dudley wanted to know if she was attractive.

The doorbell rang, and Vernon went to get it. A few seconds later, a very surprised Vernon walked to the kitchen with a tall man in uniform behind him; Dudley and Petunia drifted to the doorway to meet them. "This is... Captain Martin Ingersoll, you said?" The man nodded. "He's here to talk to Dudley!"

Dudley's first thought was: think fast. Dudley had never met Ingersoll, but had heard about him from Harry. If Ingersoll was there to talk to Dudley, it had to be about something to do with magic. Dudley didn't know how Ingersoll had found him, but it had to be from the internet, and Ingersoll might assume Dudley's parents knew how he was employed. He had to make sure his cover wasn't blown.

"Captain," said Dudley pleasantly, in a tone that suggested they knew each other. He stepped forward to shake Ingersoll's hand. "Good to see you again." As he spoke, he gave Ingersoll a significant look. The message was, please play along.

Ingersoll was slightly taken aback, but recovered. "Yes, you too. I'm very sorry to disturb you here, but I somehow lost your cell number, and there's an urgent matter we need to discuss."

Dudley nodded casually, as if this sort of thing happened all the time. "Country comes first," he agreed. "Captain, this is my mother, Petunia, and you've already met my father Vernon."

Very impressed, both eagerly shook Ingersoll's hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Captain," enthused Petunia. "We had

no idea Dudley worked with the good people in the armed forces."

"Doesn't tell us much of what he does, sad to say," added Vernon.

Dudley shrugged. "Security. You know how it is," he said to Ingersoll.

"All too well," agreed Ingersoll, clearly catching on. "Unfortunately, not everyone takes it as seriously as Dudley obviously does."

Dudley turned to his parents. "I think I know why he's here, and it's very confidential. I'm sorry, but we need to go upstairs to talk. We'll try not to be too long."

"Absolutely," agreed Vernon enthusiastically. "Take all the time you need."

"Dinner's not for another thirty minutes," added Petunia with a smile.

Dudley nodded. "Thanks, excuse us." He led Ingersoll upstairs and to his old bedroom, which Petunia of course kept immaculate, and closed the door. "Sorry about that," he said, keeping his voice low.

Ingersoll nodded. "What do they think you do?"

"MI5," said Dudley.

Ingersoll suppressed a laugh. "You are a bit young, though I suppose they have trainees your age. I guess they wouldn't care for your working for the Ministry?"

"To put it mildly," said Dudley. "I see you've been keeping up with the wizarding websites."

"Too interesting not to. Especially recently, seems like there's an awful lot going on. Quite chaotic."

"Unfortunately, yes," said Dudley. "But it's a lot like that in the real world, too. Some of us are wondering if they aren't connected."

Ingersoll raised his eyebrows, impressed. "That's the reason I'm here, in fact. I'm wondering that myself. It seems like the lines between what they call the Muggle world and the magical world are getting blurry. I read online about the attack that took out Hogwarts' magic, and then saw that picture this morning in the Sun. I've seen the place up close, I know exactly what it looks like. Just how close are you guys to getting exposed?"

Dudley almost objected to the phrase 'you guys', since he was a Muggle, but he did work for the Ministry, after all. "The next straw could break the camel's back. But only a few of us know it, and most can't be bothered to care."

"How can they not care? Don't they know what would happen if the world knew about them? It would make this current chaos look like nothing."

Dudley shrugged. "They're so used to being anonymous that they take it for granted, and they don't know about the internet. But yeah, it's dangerous. We dodged a bullet today, with that picture." Dudley went on to tell the story.

"Very close. Well, part of the reason I'm here is that I don't want it to be known either. Like I said, I don't like to think about what would happen. But something's up that I think

the magical community needs to know about, and you're the perfect person to tell, working for the Ministry."

"Well, perfect in the sense that I'll understand what you're talking about. Not perfect in that no one at the Ministry except my partner and my boss will care. But go ahead anyway."

"They'd better care, or else it'll be too late at some point soon," said Ingersoll darkly. "But on to why I'm here. First of all, I need to emphasize that what I'm about to tell you is so top secret that if it were discovered that I told you, the best job I could get after I was dishonorably discharged would be at a hamburger joint, assuming I didn't end up in prison. But you need to know this.

"I've spent some time in Iraq, it shouldn't surprise you to hear. Special Forces, you know, there's a lot we can do there. Some of it's fighting the insurgency, but not that much; as you know, we Brits get the easier areas because political support for our presence is tenuous, to say the least. Our population wouldn't put up with a tenth the casualties the Americans do. It also shouldn't surprise you that we in Special Forces have, especially when deployed in a place like Iraq, some contact with MI6. We help them, they help us. To make a long story short, they have an asset, a double agent who works for Iranian intelligence. They've had him for a while, long before any of this happened, before nine-eleven. He doesn't like the religious zealots running his country. MI6 is very sure of his true loyalty, he's done a lot for them. He's been helping these days with what information he can get about the insurgents and Iran's relationship with them.

"Apparently, he knows the 'Death To America' man, personally. Not that they're friends, but they were

colleagues, they worked together. First of all, our agent says Mr. Death-To-America was no zealot, and very much not the type to do anything like that. Especially martyring himself. Uneducated kids may do that; professional spies don't. But what's even stranger is that our agent saw Mr. Death-To-America, in the flesh, in Tehran, literally three hours before the sarin gas attack. He's absolutely sure. Three hours! There's no way in hell anyone could make it from Iran to New York that fast, never mind the other logistical impossibilities of it. He's baffled, he doesn't know what to make of it. Neither do the Iranians; he says they're going nuts trying to figure out what happened. We don't know what to make of it either; the few who know have been floating theories like he had an identical twin, separated at birth. It's stupid, but more plausible than any alternate explanation."

Dudley understood. "Except magic."

"And I couldn't tell them about that even if I wanted to, since Harry put that Forgetfulness Charm on me. I can only talk about this to people who already know about the magical world. Anyway, there's another thing. This hasn't been public, but a few people in military and intelligence circles know about it. There's a video that went up on a website for a very short time—"

"I know, I've seen it. You mean where the guy just seems to appear out of nowhere?"

"Yes. I'm impressed that you saw it; I heard the Americans shut it down fast. I haven't seen it, just heard about it. The people I've talked to assume it's a fake, but it would be a very strange fake. But adding that to what our agent says, and what I know about magic... well, it's hard to think what else it could be. But I couldn't even go to my superiors, or intelligence with this..."

"Because of the Forgetfulness Charm," finished Dudley. "I know how you feel. By the way, my partner at the Ministry and I are pretty convinced the video isn't fake. We went to the guy's house, and the government had apparently already been there, the woman hustled us out as fast as she could—"

"You went there?" repeated Ingersoll incredulously. "And you weren't taken into custody?"

Dudley frowned. "No, why would we be?"

"First of all, tell me exactly what happened," requested Ingersoll. Dudley did; at the end of the story, Ingersoll shook his head. "If your partner couldn't Apparate, you'd have been in custody very soon thereafter. You need to be more careful, Dudley. The Americans—maybe FBI, maybe NSA—who went to the young man's home and took the video would have left behind bugs, maybe even small cameras. They'd have agents in a van near the place, and they'd be observing who came and went. They'd want to know who displayed overt interest; they'd consider it a possible, though longshot, way to get a lead."

Dudley finally understood. "You mean, maybe someone connected to those who did it might come looking for the evidence."

"Yes. And here are you two, walking along the street like nothing happened. They were going to follow you, see where you went. You never know what could be a lead. Then you go and disappear. Bet they were ticked," he added with a grin.

"Guess so. Well, anyway, we came away convinced that the video was genuine, but we didn't know what to do from there. Technically we should talk to the American wizards and ask them to investigate, but my boss is convinced that

they won't without hard evidence, and we have none. We haven't done anything since then, because we really can't think of what to do."

"I can see that," said Ingersoll with mild resignation. "But you'd better think of something, because I can see things going to hell if you don't."

"How do you mean? You think whoever did this might do more?"

"I'm not saying I know that, but the Americans knowing Iran didn't do this would go a long way to calming things down. This hasn't hit the papers yet, but Iran is doing a big mobilization. Reserve units are being called up, troops are starting to mass at the border. There's talk that Iran might invade Iraq pre-emptively."

"What?" stammered a stunned Dudley.

"Just talk; it could be very wrong. Any troop movement like that is going to raise eyebrows. I'm sure you know that since the sarin attack, America has made quite a show of moving whatever assets it has into the area, trying to wield as big a stick as possible. When this becomes public, Iran will just say it's reacting defensively, given America's aggressive posturing, and so forth. It would be plausible, but it just so happens that they'd be in a good position to launch an assault."

"Could Iran even win?"

"It's not so much whether they could win, but whether they could wear down the Americans, and especially, us. I'm sure you know that the British public isn't going to stand for another war. On the other hand, we are already there, relatively close to the possible front. We couldn't exactly

turn tail and run, but if Iran invaded, there would be huge public pressure to do just that. Prime Minister Barclay's government might very well fall."

"Not while British troops are under attack," countered Dudley.

"Maybe. I would hope not. But Barclay's got to be extremely concerned. I hear he's trying to talk the Americans down, but they have their own political pressures. Not to mention a President who seems bent on conflict. The bottom line is that this could explode into open conflict, which would be bad enough, but the idea that wizards caused it... your Ministry needs to do something. Or the American wizards, but somebody."

"Of course, you're right, but it's hard to do with what we have," pointed out Dudley. "You and I are pretty sure of this, but we have absolutely zero proof, and anybody I ask to get involved is going to want more than what we have before doing it."

"There's nobody you can talk to?"

Dudley thought. "I'd have to go through Arthur. He's friends with Kingsley; Kingsley would listen to him. Problem is, both Arthur and Kingsley have a lot of their own problems right now. Kingsley might say he wanted to help, but didn't have the manpower. All I can tell you is, I'll do what I can."

"I suppose that's all anyone can do," said Ingersoll. He stood; so did Dudley. "I'll be off; your dinner's probably ready by now."

Dudley chuckled. "They'll ask you to stay, just so you know. This has done a lot to reinforce my cover. They'll think I'm some high-level government operative now."

"Glad I could help," responded an amused Ingersoll. They left the bedroom and walked down the stairs.

They were greeted by Petunia, wearing her best smile. "Dinner is almost ready. Captain, we'd be honored if you'd join us."

"Thank you, I'd like to," said Ingersoll politely. "But I'm on duty, they expect me back. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, of course," agreed Vernon. "Very nice to have met you." He shook Ingersoll's hand again while Dudley tried to keep a smile off his face.

"Oh, before I forget," said Dudley, taking out his wallet and handing Ingersoll a card. "My contact info. Cell, e-mail, chat."

Ingersoll reached into a shirt pocket and handed Dudley his own card. "Here you go. And keep in touch."

"Definitely," agreed Dudley. They shook hands; Ingersoll said goodbye to the Dursleys and left.

Petunia beamed at Dudley. "Oh, my, I knew you were important, but an Army captain..."

"Special Forces, actually. But don't repeat that," Dudley belatedly added as his parents exchanged further impressed looks. "Seriously—this is very serious—you can't tell anyone that he visited, anything about him at all. Just that I talked to him at all, if some people found out, would be very bad. Are you okay with that?"

"Of course," Vernon assured him. Petunia reluctantly nodded her assent; Dudley knew that this was just the kind of thing his mother would love to gossip about to her friends, to brag

about how important her son was. Dudley didn't really think that it would be bad if anyone found out, but you never knew. It was better to be on the safe side.

After dinner, Snape signaled Ginny that he had free time. Since their agreement on Sunday morning, there hadn't been a chance to meet, as Snape had been too busy with Hogwarts responsibilities in the wake of the attack on Hogwarts' magical defenses. Now that the defenses were back, he could be spared; he had checked with Hermione to make sure she didn't need him before calling Ginny.

She'd intended to tell no one about her time with Snape, but she realized that she at least had to tell her mother, as someone needed to take care of James. Molly was surprised, but agreed to keep it a secret for Ginny. She knew her friends would ask eventually, but she would just tell them she needed time alone, and that she was safe.

To make sure they weren't disturbed, Ginny decided to ask Snape if he minded meeting on the Hawaiian beach Harry had introduced her to. Snape raised an eyebrow at the peculiar choice of setting, but agreed. She used Harry to transport them there.

After Harry flew away, Snape spoke. "Does he know why we are coming here?"

She nodded. "I told him I felt I needed to learn Legilimency. I told him directly, not through Hermione or Pansy, so I didn't get an answer. I didn't need one, really. I don't think he knows the other thing, but he can probably tell with his phoenix-sense that I want to do something to help you as well. Do you care whether he knows or not?"

"No, I was merely curious."

"Well, let's sit down," she suggested. Snape looked uncomfortable sitting in sand; she watched him do it slowly, as if not sure how. "I am sure there will be sand all through my clothes," he muttered.

"You can always get rid of it with magic. Anyway, look around, it's beautiful. Isn't the weather great?"

Snape paid close attention to his surroundings for the first time. "It is... satisfactory."

I've got a lot of work to do, thought Ginny, if I can't get him to enjoy and appreciate a setting like this. One thing at a time, though. "How's Hermione doing?"

"Her emotions come rather close to the surface at times, but I suppose it is understandable, given the recent crises. Her performance as headmistress has been highly adequate. Like you and the others, the headmistress went through enough in the Voldemort era to not be intimidated by difficult circumstances, and knows how to handle herself and what needs to be done. The governors attempted to use her age to denigrate her, but she is far more qualified than any of them, or Umbridge."

"I'm wondering... why do you refer to Hermione as 'the headmistress' instead of 'Hermione,' even just here with me?"

"Habit, I suppose. I assume your point is that formality is a way of keeping distance from people. I respect her, but we have never been particularly close. And before you comment, I mean 'close' by my standards. Even then, I would say that Harry is the only one I could be considered close to. Also, Professor..." He paused. "Also Minerva, before she died."

"And Albus," she added.

He nodded. "Needless to say. One... I am not used to using the word, but one regret I have is that I was not able to spend time with him after my Cleansing was reversed. He would have taken great pleasure in talking to me in my current state."

She could tell that he was making an effort to talk about things he usually wouldn't. "I'm sure he got great pleasure seeing you happy, from where he was."

"I know. The fact is that one of the reasons I agreed to your suggestion regarding this is that I know he would have wanted me to do so. He would not have told me I was wasting my life, or even implied it, but I know it would have made him happy that I was willing to try to... 'peek out of my shell,' as you so colorfully put it. I have no doubt he would have encouraged it, and much sooner, had he been around."

There was silence for a few seconds; she wanted to be careful not to push him too far too fast. He had already said a lot, for him.

He spoke again. "How is Harry doing with the bonding with your son?"

It suddenly occurred to Ginny that Snape referred to James only as 'your son,' never by name. Even so long after childhood, even though it referred to a different person, Snape clearly could not consider the name James Potter in anything but anger. "He says it's all right. Not without its problems, but not as bad as the other phoenixes feared."

He nodded. "How are *you* doing with it?"

Her eyebrows went up involuntarily; she quickly decided it was too late to pretend she wasn't surprised by the question. "Better. I was really depressed when it happened, I cried more than once. But obviously, saving James took the sting out of it. I guess I just understand that it wasn't meant to be that way. I understood that before, in a way. But there's a big difference between understanding something and accepting it."

"I know that very well," he agreed. After another pause, he started the Legilimency lesson. He taught it the way Dumbledore had taught Harry, not the way he had taught—or, 'not taught'—Harry Occlumency in Harry's fifth year at Hogwarts. He was thankful that the need to deliberately cause people distress was far behind him.

"You have to *do* something!" shouted Trent at Kingsley.

It was Wednesday morning at ten a.m. Eight wizards had been killed during the night, in five locations. Included were two prominent businessmen, an assistant editor at the Prophet, and two undersecretaries. It was the last two that had Trent agitated, Kingsley knew well. He was reporting—as a courtesy, not a requirement, since the undersecretaries could take no officially binding action—to the undersecretaries on the state of the crisis; he had known Trent would react this way.

"What would you have me do?" asked Kingsley calmly.

"I've already told you that! Give the undersecretaries Auror protection!"

"You didn't ask that," responded Kingsley. "You asked for protection for yourself only, and I told you I couldn't give you protection I didn't give the other undersecretaries."

"Well, we're down to eight! Wait long enough, and soon there will be so few of us that it won't strain your manpower to protect each of us individually!"

"And what about the business leaders?" asked Kingsley.

"What about them?"

"Two of the country's top ten businessmen were killed last night," Kingsley pointed out. "Two others have been killed in the past week. That's three out of eleven undersecretaries, and four out of ten prominent businessmen. Should I put personal protection on the other top businessmen? If so, I don't have the manpower. If not, why are you more deserving of protection than them?"

Kingsley knew he was infuriating Trent, but he didn't care. "You are actively seeking to leave us unprotected!" shouted Trent. "You're looking for any excuse to avoid it!"

Arthur couldn't help but interject. "Stop using the word 'us.' You're only worried about yourself, and you're only framing it that way so the rest of us will support you. You want as much protection for yourself as you can get, and you don't care about anyone else."

"How dare you criticize me while you sit in your home under the all-purpose Harry Potter shield that keeps out all intruders," spat Trent. "You're safe, why should you care about the rest of us?"

"I do, and you know that full well. I just don't care for hypocrisy. You tried to get special treatment a few days ago, so don't pretend it's about all of us. And Harry's help notwithstanding, I am a target, as is my family. My grandson was almost killed, and my son-in-law may never be able to return to human form. Don't tell me about how safe I am.

Any of us is vulnerable. All Kingsley is saying is that we need to think about how safe *all* of us are, not how safe *some* of us are. I flew to protect Hogwarts five years ago, was almost killed by Voldemort seven years ago protecting the Ministry, and I'm not going to take any of that from you." He glared at Trent, then before Trent responded, turned to Kingsley. "Is there anything that could be done that isn't being done?"

"We could re-institute the ARA," Kingsley said, referring to the Apparation Restriction Act, which was in effect for the last year of Voldemort's attacks before he was defeated. "Well, we couldn't really, it would have to be voluntary since the Ministry has no authority to pass new laws. I'm not totally convinced that it would do any good; I think our enemy may have means to avoid magical detection, based on what happened at Hogwarts. It was infiltrated in a way that shouldn't be possible."

Kingsley thought for another few seconds in silence. "No, thinking about it more, it's no good. We can't give it the force of law, and it's just not going to work if it's only voluntary. Some people violated the ARA at first five years ago, thinking along the lines of 'just this once'. If it's voluntary, we're going to be chasing down people all day long. But really, Arthur, there just is nothing else we can do. We've thought about it."

"Would it be possible to go over the names of those who've been killed and develop a profile of likely targets? I mean, for example, four out of the top ten business leaders is a lot. You could give the other six special protection. That sort of thing."

"The pattern isn't that clear," responded Kingsley. "There's a general pattern of targeting people who are fairly important but not extremely important. A lot of segments of society

have been hit. All I can tell you is that absent any political authority, the Aurors are going to do what we think saves the most lives, not just the most important people."

"Important people are targets! You admitted that!" argued Trent loudly.

"Yes, I said not *just* the most important people. But many regular people have been killed as well. Here's what I'll do, Undersecretary Trent. If any undersecretary will say the following—and nothing else—to the Prophet, he or she will get special protection. They have to say, "I have requested the Aurors to provide me with special protection, although I understand this means that there will be fewer Aurors available to provide protection for the rest—"

"You bastard!" shouted Trent, angrier than Arthur had ever seen him. "You'd make us commit political suicide to be protected?"

"It would be the truth," countered Kingsley. "I'm not saying you're not going to be protected, Trent. I'm not even going to say that you won't get more protection than most people. What I am saying is that you are not going to harangue or pressure us into doing it. I say again, we will do what we think saves the most lives. That's what we would do anyway, and a Minister who had any honor at all would assume that we would do that and leave us to do our jobs. The Aurors are not yours to order around, at least not until Friday."

"And on Friday, you're going to regret what you're doing now," said Trent coldly.

Kingsley returned Trent's gaze. "I don't think so. In any case, I'm a busy man, and I'm done here. Until there's a Minister, I'll report to the undersecretaries if I have something in particular to say. Good morning."

There was silence among the eight undersecretaries. Finally one said, "Roger, would it kill you to be nice to the man, at least until Friday? You might get better results."

Arthur was fed up, and didn't care whether or not he insulted Trent. "Roger's not trying to get results. He's trying to show who's boss. In his mind, he's already Minister, and he can't understand why some people aren't treating him that way."

"Is that so," mocked Trent.

"Yes, it is. I've heard you use the phrase 'Minister-in-waiting' more than once. There's no such position."

"Yes, there is. It just isn't official. But anyone with a brain in his head knows it, and most people treat me accordingly, as they should."

Arthur shook his head, but said nothing more. At least there's one good thing about what's coming, he thought; one way or the other, I won't be working with this jackass anymore.

Dudley and Colin persuaded Arthur to use his influence to set up a meeting with Kingsley for them, though he suggested they keep their presentation as brief as possible. Dudley did most of the talking, as he related a lot of his talk with Ingersoll. Kingsley asked few questions, though he was quite surprised to hear that Harry had long ago lifted Ingersoll's Memory Charm. "That Harry, such a rascal," he muttered.

Kingsley paused for a minute after the briefing was finished. "Well, gentlemen, that was impressive. But I'm not sure what you want me to do about it."

"We were hoping," said Colin, "that you would help us investigate it further. We know you're busy, but—"

"That's putting it mildly," Kingsley interrupted. "If I took even one Auror off duty protecting the population to do this, Trent would howl to the Prophet, and this time he'd be right. First of all, the Americans should be doing this, even though I know they won't. Secondly, if what you think is true, then it's probably the same man or group responsible for the current wizarding mayhem, in which case we're looking for him anyway. Thirdly, suppose we prove that the American gas attack was done by a wizard. Besides getting the Americans to get involved—which they would do only grudgingly—what would it accomplish?"

"We could intervene to reverse the effects of what was done," suggested Colin.

Kingsley looked at Colin as though he were crazy, then at Arthur to see what he thought. "Deliberately intervene in Muggle affairs? Are you kidding?"

Dudley's annoyance came through in his tone. "You heard what we said, Kingsley. If a wizard did this, and we're almost sure that one did, it could start a war where there wouldn't have been one otherwise! Thousands of people would die, because of wizards. You don't think that's worth intervening?"

Dudley could tell his words had at least some impact. "There's a very long-standing tradition that we don't do that," said Kingsley. "It seems very strange to even consider it. But that kind of thing would have to be decided at very high levels. There would have to be a meeting of the International Confederation of Wizards, the proof would have to be laid out and debated. It would be a major debate."

"There isn't time for all that!" insisted Dudley. "This war, if there's going to be one, could break out at any time!"

Kingsley gave Dudley a stern look. "Things take the time they take, Dudley. It may not be right, but it just is. If anyone's going to intervene, it should be the Americans, since it's happening in their country. Look, you could go to the Prophet, see what interest you can scrape up."

Dudley shook his head. "It would be like with the Americans, they're too preoccupied with this crisis, they wouldn't care. Besides, what Ingersoll told me is very confidential. He could be prosecuted if his information gets made public."

Puzzled, Kingsley replied, "That would just be in the wizarding world."

"The wizarding websites," Dudley reminded him. "We have to assume that anything that's in the Prophet could get to those websites. I won't even tell individual wizards I don't know well. I'm not going to betray Ingersoll's trust."

Kingsley shrugged. "Then I'm sorry, Dudley, but I really don't know what can be done, and I don't think the Aurors are the solution in any case. You really need to go to your American counterparts. I know we don't have much of a functioning government right now, but that may actually be an advantage."

Dudley sighed. "Yeah, that's the other problem, this deadline. In two days I'll probably be gone, and even if I'm not, he'd never let us proceed with this. He considers the whole department irrelevant."

"Well, thank you for your time, anyway," said Colin. They all stood as Kingsley said goodbye and left Arthur's office. The three remaining sat back down.

"Well, that went well," said Dudley dejectedly.

"About as well as expected," pointed out Arthur. "He has an open mind, at least, but he's right that this wouldn't normally be considered a matter for Aurors. Sorry, boys. All we can do is keep monitoring the situation, and try again if something comes up. In the meantime, I'll meet with my American counterpart. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe they'll be willing to do something."

I wouldn't bet on it, thought Dudley.

The Deputy Secretary of State walked into his boss's office and took a seat. His boss, he knew, had just completed two hours' worth of telephone consultations with his counterparts of the more important countries in the world. "So, how're we doing?"

The dismay on Rogers' face was clear. "We're taking it up the ass."

Davidson nodded. "I just hope you'll stay away from that phrase when you're on the Sunday morning talk shows. How far up the ass are we taking it?"

"Pretty far. Before, we knew who our friends were by who stood with us. Today, we know by who tells us they really wish they could stand with us, but they live in democracies, and have to listen to their voters. And we can tell who our friends are in that they're the ones not taking advantage of the situation to bring us down a few pegs. The French and Germans in particular couldn't wait to tell me how they won't hesitate to strongly condemn any action we take against Iran, no matter the circumstances. Even those who rely on us for their protection are nearly pleading with us not to do anything, because they don't want to see more peace

rallies like there were before Iraq. We have, unfortunately, run out of credibility."

"That almost seems amazing, considering that we have in our possession a dead man who worked for Iranian intelligence," noted Davidson. "But of course I know that the facts often take a backseat to the political realities. No good news at all?"

Rogers shook his head. "People are believing what they want to believe. Of course, they say that about us; it just seems like we have more reason to believe what we do. Most everyone acts as though the burden of proof is on us, as if that guy wasn't pretty good proof all by himself." In the end, he knew, it all came down to what each country considered to be in its own interest, and especially, in the political interest of its leaders. Facts were less important than perception, though of course facts could shape perception.

"Vince tells me that his boss tells him that you've been taking a surprisingly hard line in the meetings," said Davidson cautiously, carefully checking his boss's reaction.

Rogers knew he'd hear that at some point, and had a response ready. "Adams may be exaggerating, since he's probably surprised to see even a hint of that from me. But I'm not necessarily opposed to an aggressive response, even some bombing. I wouldn't be so sanguine if Iran were at least acting like they wanted to cooperate, but they're just giving us the finger. They could cooperate; this is a considered foreign policy decision. I'm inclined to feel they deserve what they get."

"And if we bomb them, and they decide to invade Iraq?"

Rogers sighed. "Then the President gets what he wants."

"Anne?" Trent shouted into the empty house, just having Apparated from the Ministry.

She hurried down the stairs. "Roger! What are you doing here?" She wasn't unhappy to see him, just surprised.

He gave her a quick kiss, and they sat on the love seat in the living room. "I just wanted to come home and relax for an hour or so before going back in. I'm going to give a press conference at six to talk about what tomorrow's agenda will be. I want to get out of the gate fast."

"You'll finally be Minister, in less than twenty-four hours," she said, pleased and proud, but also worried. Almost as much as she was happy that he would be Minister, she was also relieved that he would finally be given personal Auror protection. Granted, it hadn't helped Bright, but it would make her feel much better.

"Finally, no thanks to Weasley," he grumbled. "Anybody else in that position, I'd have been in the job last Friday or Saturday. But no, he has to fly in the face of all common sense."

He'd been complaining about it all week. He was a man in a hurry, who'd do what it took to get what he wanted. It was one of the things she liked about him, even if it meant he was sometimes less patient than he should be. "Do you really think you'll be able to do anything to help the situation?"

"Like I've said, it's a matter of leadership," he said. She could see the confidence in his eyes. "Bright's attitude was, let the Aurors take care of it. I want to inspire people, give them confidence that their government is being as aggressive as possible in dealing with the situation. That in itself may save lives, but it'll definitely reduce the fear,

which is part of why this is being done. Bright never understood that, but he was such a good politician that people overlooked it. He had Potter for that. But Potter's not around now, so people need to inspire themselves. I want to help them do that."

"What's the first thing?" she asked.

"The main thing is that I'm going to give a major address in Diagon Alley to announce the rebuilding plans for the businesses that were damaged or destroyed in the dragon attack. The themes will be initiative and community spirit. We will catch whoever's been doing this. All of us, not just the Aurors. I want people to feel like we're all in this together. I could have gotten a week's head start, if not for Weasley. The thing is—" He glanced at her, and shook his head ruefully. "I know, I do go on about that."

"It's all right," she assured him. "We need to talk about the things that annoy us." She didn't do that with him, though; his job was stressful enough. She had her friends for that. Ironically, one of the things that annoyed her was the time he spent at his job, and his preoccupation with it.

He nodded and continued. "It's just that he should absolutely not be there in the first place, and I think even he understands that, but he does what he does anyway. It was just Bright's sop to Potter. In most circumstances, it wouldn't be a problem. But in this particular situation, which I admit couldn't really have been foreseen, it's been disastrous. Bones and Williamson are the only other undersecretaries who aren't with me, but they recognized the inevitability of my ascension, and would have been willing to cut deals so I could take over faster. Weasley recognized it, but wouldn't cut a deal, because he has to be pure. Politics is all about deals, for crying out loud! It's the way it is, the way it should

be. Thank goodness Potter didn't want to be an undersecretary, think of the havoc he'd have caused. I mean, I respect him, who doesn't, but give me a break."

"I wonder if he's forgiven you for the Ring of Reduction thing," his wife said.

"I wonder if you have," he responded. She raised an eyebrow and looked back expressionlessly, gauging how serious he was. It had been the most controversial act of his political career, and the only one she'd ever been overtly opposed to. She felt that setting himself up to benefit if Harry and Hermione died in the Ring crossed a moral line, even for politics, and she'd been furious with him after he gave the interview in which he opposed their making the attempt.

He continued talking to sidestep the possible argument; he didn't need it when he was going to an important press conference soon. "I suppose he forgave me enough that he didn't try to hurt my career after he came out of the Ring as a hero, though I think that's less a matter of forgiveness and more just who he is. He hates politics, Bright said, and I believe him. So does Weasley, so I can't figure out why he's there."

I suppose it has nothing to do with self-interest, which is why you can't understand it, she thought. She loved him, but he could be myopic at times, especially regarding politics. He couldn't imagine a way other than what he felt was natural or usual. "Well, after tomorrow it won't matter anymore. You can just ignore him."

"I'm not going to ignore him, at least not yet. I haven't decided what I'm going to do about him. Definitely lop off his budget to what it was before last year when they hired Potter's Muggle cousin, that was a complete waste. Other

than that... there are all kinds of little things I could do to him, and I should, just to make an example. But the problem is that I don't think he'd care, and it's not very effective to punish someone if they don't care about what you're doing. So, I don't know what I'll do, but obviously that'll have to wait."

"There'll be a lot to do tomorrow," she agreed. "Are you excited?"

"A bit, but more impatient now. This should have happened last weekend. But it is very exciting. I'm a little nervous, only because of whoever's out there, there's no telling what they'll do. They could keep killing, and despite my efforts, we don't catch them. Making my name on security issues is effective at times like this, but it only lasts for so long if you don't actually provide security. I've said so much about how I'll be better at this that I'm not going to be able to say, 'Well, we're doing our best.' People will expect results, and morale notwithstanding, it's not really in my hands."

"Are you going to back off the Aurors?"

He sighed. "I hate the idea, but I may have to. The others thought it was a bad idea to even take a run at Kingsley in the first place, but I felt I had to see what headway I could make. Not much; he didn't back down at all. Guess I have to be satisfied with the Ministry and Hogwarts."

All of the teachers except Hagrid were in the staff room at five-thirty. Hermione activated the Looking Glass, and they saw images in the air of what was happening in the Ministry Atrium. At the moment it was as usual; a lot of foot traffic, people Apparating in and out. Hermione saw a group of journalists off to one side, chatting.

Trent's senior aide stuck his head into his boss's office.
"There's quite a crowd in the Atrium."

"Only fifteen more minutes," Trent replied. They would have to wait.

"Yes, but one other thing... Weasley's down there now. He's going to talk to the press for a few minutes, he said. He could start any time."

Trent cursed mildly and stood. Normally Weasley was anything but a press hound, so why did he have to start now? "I'd better go see what he's going to say," he said resignedly. "If he's decided at the last minute to give me his blessing, well, it's way too late."

"I'd guess that's what it'll be," said the aide. "Unity of the government, and all that."

"Screw that," said Trent brusquely. He didn't usually use that kind of language, but something about Weasley annoyed him greatly. "He'll find out all about the unity of the government when it's united against him." They walked down a flight of stairs—Trent had very favorable office space, only a minute from the Atrium on foot—and were soon at the edge of the Atrium. Weasley appeared to be just about to speak.

Arthur looked around as he stood at the conjured podium; there had to be two hundred people, not to mention ten journalists, including two from America and two from Europe. They were there to hear Trent, of course, but they would listen to him first. It was by far the largest audience he'd ever had.

There was no microphone; he would have to project his voice, which he was not as naturally good at as Trent.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" he said in as loud a voice as he could without seeming to shout. The Atrium gradually quieted down and gave him its attention. Arthur glanced up to see Harry suddenly appear in the air; Harry quickly flew to a perch against a wall near the ceiling. Arthur couldn't suppress a smile as the entrance caused murmuring in the crowd. He could also see Ron, one of the three Aurors providing protection in the Atrium.

"Thank you," he said, remembering to keep projecting his voice. "I know you came to hear Undersecretary Trent, but I have an announcement which I think will interest most everyone. I will try to be finished by six o'clock, which is when I believe he planned to speak.

"We are living through a very challenging time right now. There have been such times before, and there will be again. These are times that test us, both as individuals and as a society. The choices we make are critical ones.

"It seems to me that one of the most critical choices of all is the choice of who is to lead us through such a difficult time. Let me pause to once again pay tribute to former Minister Bright, who was an excellent Minister, and to express the hope that our society will do its utmost to be supportive of his wife Madeline, and of all the loved ones of those lost over the last two weeks.

"But Minister Bright is no longer with us, and we must make a choice about leadership. Or rather, it should be a choice. Unfortunately, we are facing a selection without a real choice. Only Undersecretary Roger Trent has announced his intention to seek the Ministership, and no one has challenged that. Some will say this is as it should be, that it reflects a consensus in our society. But I have worked with Undersecretary Trent for some time now, and the sad fact is

that I, for reasons I will not detail here and now, do not think he would be a good Minister and cannot support him. I very much wish that Undersecretary Amelia Bones had sought the position; I could enthusiastically support her. But her niece's recent heroism was a tragedy for her, and I respect that the time is not right for her to seek such responsibility."

Trent's aide leaned over. "Did he really do this just to trash you? Is he that stupid?"

Trent was fuming, trying hard to keep his temper in check. "Whatever his reason, he'll pay for it," he responded quietly.

"I strongly believe that our society should have a choice," Arthur continued. "As things stand now, tomorrow morning Roger Trent will become this society's leader with nothing more than the passive assent of a people going through very difficult times. I believe that our method of choosing leaders normally works well, but has failed us on this occasion. I therefore announce my intention to seek the position of Minister of Magic, and I challenge Undersecretary Trent to a Choosing."

Three Nights Before

"It's his phoenix intuition," said Hermione. She turned to Arthur, sadness on her face. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I know you're not going to like this..."

She took a deep breath. "This is going to sound strange, because... well, because it is, and because it's not the usual kind of thing for a phoenix to suggest. Harry got something from phoenix intuition just now." She looked at Arthur, solemn. "He says that you should challenge Trent to a Choosing."

Now the others felt the same stunned surprise, none more than Arthur, who did a double-take. "Two questions. One, are you very sure you have that right?"

Both Pansy and Hermione nodded. "He heard me say it to you, it confirmed to him that we got it right."

"All right, the second question. Is he crazy? I wouldn't have a chance!"

"It really seems that way," agreed Hermione. "But no, he's not crazy."

"How can he suggest that, anyway?" wondered Ginny. "Harry's not exactly an expert on politics, and as a phoenix, isn't so well informed on the current situation. How can he know enough to say that?"

"It's not a matter of how much he knows," responded Hermione. "He could know nothing about it and still suggest it. The whole point of phoenix intuition is that it's not about facts, it's about... well, intuition. It comes straight from the spiritual realm."

"Wouldn't he get intuition only about things that affect him, or his bondmate?" asked Molly.

"Usually, but not always. It's about things that are important to him; he doesn't want to see Trent be Minister, or Hogwarts taken over. It's as if he asked the spiritual realm what was the best thing to do in this situation, and that was the answer."

"But Dad *will* win, then," suggested Ron eagerly. "If Harry got the intuition that Dad should, then Dad will win, because phoenix intuition is never wrong, isn't that right?"

Hermione slowly shook her head. "Not exactly. Harry's intuition isn't exactly saying, 'if Arthur runs, he will win.' It's more that it's saying, 'Arthur running is the best thing to do in this situation.' Arthur could lose. The only thing we know for sure is that Arthur running, win or lose, leads to a better situation in the long run than if he didn't run. Harry knows nothing other than that."

Ron's mouth hung open in surprise. "And Harry's asking Dad to risk his job, the Burrow, everything they own, on that?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes."

"Does it take into account what happens to Dad if he loses?" demanded Ron.

"Harry knows what happens, so the answer is yes," responded Hermione. She looked at Arthur sadly; she wouldn't want to make this kind of decision. Arthur was still stunned.

Even Snape didn't hide his surprise. "I am sure that we all are aware that Professor Potter would not suggest such a thing lightly."

"Of course, he wouldn't," said Arthur quietly.

"He's sending again," said Pansy. "He says he knows how it sounds, and he's sorry for the pressure it puts on you. He just knows what he knows."

Arthur nodded. "I understand. I was just thinking that it's a good thing the kids are all grown; only Molly and I would be affected, except for you two having to find a new place to live," he said to Ron and Pansy. "I was thinking, what if I lost, what possessions we would lose. Then I thought—and this is

just as disturbing—what if I somehow won? Being Minister isn't exactly something I'd prefer to do."

"Understandable," said Snape. "But as I mentioned to Professor Granger recently, sometimes fate directs us in ways we do not expect."

"In this case," mused Arthur, "that's putting it mildly."

Four hours later, Arthur and Molly lay in their bed, getting ready to sleep. "Are you going to do it?" Her tone told him that it was his decision.

He rolled onto his side toward her, and met her eyes. "The financial part doesn't bother me that much. Harry has plenty in his vault that he'd want us to use, and we would just stay with him and Ginny for the time being. It's more the public aspect of it. Everyone would say, there goes Arthur Weasley on a fool's errand. If I do it, I won't tell anyone the true reason; I'd just say that opposing Trent is the right thing to do. I'd get points for nobility, if nothing else. But in the minds of... well, everyone that knows anything about politics, it would be seen as utterly foolish. It would be difficult to go out there every day and campaign, knowing how it would be seen."

"Everyone wouldn't think like that," she said. "The Prophet might point out that Trent is the overwhelming favorite, but people would listen to what you had to say. You might get support you didn't expect. Maybe some scandal would happen at the last minute to give you the win. Anything could happen. And doing the right thing is noble. You would have nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, I think it would be something to be proud of, win or lose. Taking on a rotten man like Trent is noble, even if not everyone knows he's rotten."

He nodded. "I see your point. And at least it would only be for two weeks. I'll announce on Thursday night, that'll delay his taking office for as long as possible."

"So, you're going to do it, then."

Putting a hand on her shoulder, he nodded. "It's kind of scary, but I don't see what else I can do. You don't argue with phoenix intuition."

Present Day

There was a mild gasp, then complete silence in the Atrium. Arthur glanced at Trent and saw perhaps the most stunned expression he'd ever seen. Colin and Dudley, also in attendance, looked on, slack-jawed in astonishment.

"A Choosing has not been held for a long time; I believe the last one was almost ninety years ago. I predict that one of the front-page articles in tomorrow's Daily Prophet will be an explanation of how the Choosing works, as many people will not know. I make this challenge regretfully—"

"Are you out of your mind?" demanded an outraged Trent, taking a few steps across the Atrium to where Arthur was standing. "You will lose, lose everything, and in the meantime tie us up in knots for another two weeks! Is that what you're trying to do? Are you so desperate to stop me from being Minister, or to keep the government tied up, that you would go to these extremes?"

There was murmuring everywhere, as people had finally gotten over their shock, and started thinking about it. Arthur raised his voice again and glared at Trent. "Undersecretary Trent, if you'd stop and think for a moment, you'd see that I'm not trying to stop the government. The law provides that undersecretaries competing for an open Ministership can

campaign for as much as two months before dropping out of the race or having a Choosing. You campaigned for almost six weeks then; Voldemort was a danger, but you didn't seem to think you were 'tying the government in knots.' If I wanted to do that, I could, as an Undersecretary, simply announce my intention to seek the position, and I would have eight weeks to campaign if I wanted it. There would be far less risk to me than what I'm doing now. I call on you now to refrain from making such baseless and irresponsible accusations over the next two weeks.

"As I was saying—"

"Undersecretary Weasley!" shouted a reporter. "Do you agree with Undersecretary Trent, that you will lose?"

Arthur had prepared himself for such questions, as they were the obvious ones. "No, I don't, or else I wouldn't be doing this."

"Let me rephrase, then," interjected the reporter quickly. "Do you think it's more likely than not that you will lose?"

Arthur paused. "Many people will say that; I accept that it will be the conventional wisdom, at first. I myself am not going to handicap this race. I'm just going to spend the next two weeks asking the people to entrust me with the responsibility of their leadership and safety."

No one saw the short man with blond hair and blue eyes slowly move forward through the crowd, keeping his eye on the locations of the Aurors. Five reporters tried to ask questions at once; Arthur pointed to one. "Undersecretary Weasley, will you go before the Arbiter's portrait to determine who will be considered the challenger?"

Arthur shook his head. "I'm perfectly aware of the current political situation. I will be considered the challenger, and I wouldn't waste everyone's time to determine what is obvious."

He gestured to another reporter. "Undersecretary Weasley, you are considered, no offense, the least politically adept Undersecretary in a century—"

Arthur smiled. "No offense taken," he joked. There was light chuckling around the Atrium.

"Thank you, sir. My question is, given that, how do you expect to be Chosen?"

Arthur had expected this question as well. "The 'political adeptness' you mentioned doesn't refer to popular support, but to internal political support in the Ministry. The way you get such support is that you trade your support for the support of others. I made a conscious decision when I became an Undersecretary not to do that. I support what I think is right; I don't support what I don't think is right, and that is that. To say that I'm not politically adept is like calling someone who's chosen never to swim a poor swimmer. As for popular support, unlike most undersecretaries, I've never gone out of my way to seek it, though I've always welcomed it when I've had it, and many citizens have gone out of their way to tell me they support me. This will be the first time I've actively sought public support, so nobody can really say what will happen. Though," he added with a wry smile, "I expect that Undersecretary Trent and his supporters will not hesitate to tell you what they think will happen."

"If you lose, you would lose all your possessions," pointed out the reporter from Witch Weekly. "How much money and possessions do you have?"

Arthur smiled. "There will be some who say that I risked this only because I have such modest means that I wouldn't be losing much anyway," he said humorously. "I don't know exactly how many Galleons are in my vault, but I would wager what little there is that it's less than that of any other undersecretary. I have a home that is... again, modest, but I have a great sentimental attachment to it, and I would hate to lose it."

"Where would you stay if you did lose it?"

"I have six successful children," he answered, deadpan. "I like to think one of them would take us in."

The next questioner was interrupted by a loud flapping sound. Everyone looked up to where Harry was perched; he was flapping his wings vigorously, but not flying or otherwise moving. Arthur laughed, as did many of those present. "It seems that my son-in-law, the phoenix, has volunteered his home in that event."

"Undersecretary Weasley," asked one of the European reporters, "how would you define yourself? What distinguishing characteristics as a candidate do you believe you bring to the race?"

Arthur tried not to smile; it was a nice invitation to make a version of what would be his standard campaign speech. "I would say that there are two important things. One is as someone who fights against those who threaten our society. And I mean 'fights' with actions, not just words," he added, unable to resist glancing at Trent, who still appeared to be fuming. "I was an early member of the Order of the Phoenix, performing important tasks when most," again, a glance at Trent, "were still denying that Voldemort was back. I participated in the broom battle to defend Hogwarts. I did

those things because I strongly felt they were the right thing to do, which leads me to the second way I would identify myself: as someone who can be counted on to do the right thing. Not necessarily the politically astute thing, or the thing that will get the most support, but the right thing, the thing that is most moral, that will help the most people. I'm not going to pledge to increase people's income or to make everyone's lives happy, because those aren't things the Minister can guarantee. But I can, and do, pledge to do what I think is right in every situation. I know this isn't a promise you've heard most politicians make, but I think people are ready for it.

"I'm sorry, I can see that there are more questions, but that's all I have to say for today. I really just wanted to make the announcement. You all came here to hear Undersecretary Trent speak. Thank you."

The reporters turned to Trent. "Undersecretary Trent, are you surprised at this challenge?"

Trent had clearly made a great effort to rein in his anger, knowing he had already made a mistake losing his temper earlier, and knowing how it would appear in the Prophet. "I'm very surprised, since Arthur Weasley has almost no public profile and avowedly no political ambitions, until just now. There is simply no doubt that I'll win, and I'm sure that everyone in this building who isn't a friend of his will tell you the same thing if you ask."

Trent's aide stepped up to him and whispered for a few seconds, then stepped back again as Trent nodded. "Yes, Miss Rostoy," he said.

No one noticed Harry fly off of his perch and silently glide through the air until he had descended to near eye level.

The assassin—Joe, having taken Polyjuice Potion—was powerful enough from having killed a half-dozen wizards in America earlier that he didn't need to vocalize his Killing Curse. It flew through the air towards Trent, and got to within a yard of him when Harry intercepted it, opening his mouth and swallowing it. He exploded into ashes.

Hermione gasped as soon as Harry swooped; the information about Harry's state of mind had been relayed to her through Flora almost instantaneously. The other teachers, except Snape, did so when Harry swallowed the Curse.

"He is trying to return to human form," observed Snape.

Hermione nodded, anxiety clear on her face. "He didn't plan to do it, and he doesn't know what will happen. He could still die, for all we know."

Snape shook his head. "He won't. This had to be phoenix intuition, not the typical Harry Potter acting-without-thinking."

"Can we at least find out if he survives before making snide comments?" asked an irritated Sprout. Snape shrugged. All eyes remained riveted to the image in the air.

"Harry!" screamed Ginny, and ran forward, as did Molly.

Ron did, as well. "Everyone stand clear!" he shouted. Arthur quickly moved to join his wife and daughter. Ron scanned the crowd for any further danger, but he knew by the sound that the assailant had Disapparated while the curse was en route. Trent, still in shock, stood and stared at the circle of Weasleys around Harry's ashes. His wife ran over to his side.

"Harry," urged Ginny desperately, looking at the pile of ashes. "Come on, come back."

A few seconds later, Flora burst into the Atrium, causing the murmuring to increase. She flew down so Hermione could let go.

Ginny looked up, fear in her eyes. "Well? What do the phoenixes say?"

"Flora's giving me 'everything's going to be all right' impressions, so I think he'll come back, just like any other phoenix. It may take a minute."

"Did he know when he did it what would happen?"

"No," said Hermione.

The reporters had slowly moved nearer to Harry's ashes, looking on in wonder. "Then why did he do it?" asked one.

Arthur glanced up at the reporter in annoyance. "Because it was the right thing to do," he responded curtly. Looking back at Harry's ashes, he muttered, "He's Harry Potter. That's what he does."

"Harry, please, don't keep us waiting," said a very anxious Molly, looking at the ashes intently for any sign of movement. Suddenly a small chick with light gold wings and a light orange body struggled to its feet. Ginny let out a loud cheer, and most everyone in the Atrium followed suit.

When the cheer had died down, a reporter turned to Hermione. "Will he now be able to return to human form?"

She shrugged. "We don't know, even the phoenixes don't know. What stopped him before could stop him again. My guess is that he will be able to, but we can't know for sure."

Flora fluttered down to the ground next to Harry. She opened her beak an inch wide, and barely managed to hold Harry in her beak, at his midsection. She suddenly took flight, and disappeared.

Hermione turned to the reporters, anticipating their questions. "They're taking him to where they live. He's like a baby, he needs to be taken care of for a while. But he'll be fine."

Three reporters started to ask questions at once, and Hermione stopped them. "Look, there's a lot I don't know about this. He's the first human to be a phoenix, so this is all new. I'll do my best to answer your questions, but I'd like to do it someplace less crowded. There are meeting rooms upstairs, so if you're writing about this, you can follow me there." She headed off, followed by four of the reporters.

Two reporters walked over to Trent. "Undersecretary Trent, what is your reaction to these events?" asked one.

Trent's wife stood in front of him, indignant. "There was just an attempt on his life! How do you think he feels? We're going home, and—"

He stepped forward, putting his hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Anne." Looking at the reporter, he said, "I was challenged to the first Choosing in a hundred years by someone with no chance at all of winning, someone tried to kill me, and my life was saved by someone who is very close to my opponent, but risked his life to save me. That's a lot to happen in fifteen minutes. To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure exactly what my reaction is."

The Hogwarts professors were still watching the scene at the Atrium through the Looking Glass. "That's probably the first honest thing he's said in quite some time," said Snape

scornfully. "Well, at the very least, this buys us another two weeks." Of the teachers there, he alone knew that defiance was still an option, but there was no telling what the headmasters' portraits would do. He hoped not to have to rely on their judgment.

"You could at least pretend to be concerned about Harry," Sprout chided Snape.

"No, you have it backwards," joked John. "If he were concerned, he'd pretend not to be."

Snape ignored John's comment. "You heard the headmistress. He will be fine."

"We don't know that for sure," countered Sprout.

"I do," replied Snape. To the others' surprised looks, he added, "Nearly for sure. I visited Professor Potter's home not long ago, and persuaded Mrs. Potter to allow me to conduct a search for any potions, anywhere in the home. I discovered that someone managed to gain entry to his home, or perhaps the Burrow if laundry was done there, and treat some of his underclothes with the potion I suspected all along was used. Now that he has essentially a new body, the potion should no longer be effective. I am almost certain that when he attempts to become human again, he will succeed."

"When will that be?" asked Flitwick.

"The headmistress gave me to understand that it would be no more than two months." Sprout gave a nod of agreement. "It seems that phoenixes reach adulthood more quickly after a Burning day than they do after they are born for the first time," Snape explained. "My recollection is that this was the case with Fawkes as well. It would not be advisable for

Professor Potter to attempt to return to human form any sooner than two months from now. Since his situation is unique, we cannot know what would happen if he did so sooner, but there would be a risk that he would come back with a physical age of, say, the mid-teens. He should, and no doubt will, take the time to grow to full maturity before attempting a return."

"If whoever's doing all this is still not caught, there'll be a lot of clamor for him to come back early," said Flitwick.

"I'm sure Hermione, and the other phoenixes, will make sure he waits until he should," said Sprout. "By the way, you all know what this means."

John nodded. "Harry is, like phoenixes, effectively immortal."

"Even phoenixes are not immortal," pointed out Snape. "They can only arise from the ashes so many times. I would put his maximum lifespan at no more than five thousand years."

"Oh, is that all," chuckled John. "I suppose my wording was imprecise; that was more or less what I meant. It just seems immortal to the rest of us." He paused. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I envy him."

"I see what you mean," agreed Sprout.

"I'm not sure I do," said Flitwick. "Why not?"

"Harry has a lot of friends, us for example, who are older than him," said John sadly. "He'll see us die one by one, as he already has Dumbledore and McGonagall. Then, his contemporaries, especially his close friends and Ginny; those will be extremely hard. Then will come his students, and finally even his children. There are an awful lot of

people Harry cares about, and who care about him. To have to watch them all die while he lives on is going to be very difficult. I can easily imagine a person just becoming numb to it all, but not Harry. Even if he knows where they go after they die, he'll be deeply affected. He may just decide to live out a natural lifespan and die along with everyone else, or to just become a phoenix all the time. Like his unique magical powers, this seems great, but has a big downside."

"What do you think he'll do?" asked Flitwick to the room in general.

"I doubt he even knows," said Sprout. "He probably hasn't thought about it much. But I could see him deciding to die after, maybe, a hundred-year life. It's very ironic. We've talked before about how one aspect of the power he has is the understanding that one really shouldn't use it much; now we have the possibility of having an immensely long lifespan, but you can't reach the point of having that unless the idea of death really doesn't bother you. The ones who would want such a lifespan the most are the ones who aren't going to get it. Sometimes I think the universe really likes irony."

"Especially in that it had him save the life of someone who once thought to profit by his death," commented John.

"Yes, that too," agreed Sprout. "So, what about what Arthur did? Did anyone know he was going to do that?"

"He talked to me earlier, asked me for advice," said Dentus. "He asked me to keep it to myself, of course. But the fact is, there wasn't that much advice I could give him. He's not going to run a traditional campaign, as you saw in the Looking Glass. He's going to be himself, and if he loses, he loses."

"Is there any chance he can win?" wondered John.

Dentus shrugged. "Certainly. It could come to light that Trent is a serial child abuser, or owes goblins thousands of Galleons... you get the idea."

"There is his son," said Snape.

Dentus shook his head. "That would hurt Trent, but it wouldn't affect the race much. Professor Snape is referring to... do you all remember that story Harry told us more about than he meant to, the couple he had to say no to about the Joining? The man in the story is Trent's only son. Information like that is often used as a weapon in politics, but this is just the kind of thing that Arthur wouldn't countenance. Not to mention that letting it out would betray Harry's trust. We all know things like that don't leave this room. Anyway, it's not impossible that Arthur could win, but it's extraordinarily unlikely. He knows that."

"What made him do such a thing?" asked a mystified Sprout. "Granted, I see his point about not having that much to risk, and once he comes back, Harry can conjure Arthur and Molly anything they might want, but still... he can't really be doing all this just so people can have a choice, can he?"

Snape and Dentus, the only two people in the room who knew that the decision was based on Harry's phoenix intuition, exchanged a glance but said nothing; Arthur had made it clear that that information was to be known by the fewest people possible.

"I don't see why not," suggested John. "You already mentioned the possessions aspect, and the other consequence is that he can never work for the Ministry again, which wouldn't exactly be a crushing blow for him. Maybe he really does feel strongly that there should be a

choice. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt, anyway. Also, he's worked with Trent all that time, knows what he's like up close. I'd bet it's not pretty."

"The man did plan to inflict Umbridge on us again," said Flitwick wryly. "That's all we really need to know about him."

"Not to mention that he all but accused Professor Snape of murder just because he seemed a convenient suspect, and it served his agenda vis-à-vis Hogwarts," added John.

"I am sure that underneath it all, he is a good man," said Snape, deadpan.

Already under the covers, Anne Trent watched her husband get into bed. After the press conference, he'd had an hour-long meeting with his staff. She hadn't asked him what they talked about, as she knew it was probably to re-evaluate his tactics and approach in the wake of the evening's events. She didn't expect that she would have any luck bringing him around to her point of view, but she would try.

She asked the question as if she didn't have an opinion. "Roger, do you accept Weasley's reason for challenging you? I mean, do you think he's being truthful?"

His quick shrug indicated that he didn't care. "I will say this for him, I've never known him to lie. Behave bizarrely and stupidly, yes, but not lie. So, it could be true. In a way, he's taking advantage of the way the Choosing works. Frivolous challenges like this can usually be swatted away by the Arbiter, if he thinks the person has little or no public support. So, for example, if Potter challenged me, the Arbiter would allow it even though he has no government experience. Hell, he might even beat me. Someone with as low a profile as Weasley has wouldn't be allowed to challenge me to a Choosing, but he automatically gets to

because he's an undersecretary. Most undersecretaries give a damn about their career, or have enough possessions that losing them would bother them. Weasley has neither. The system wasn't designed for people like him. But, no system is perfect, I suppose. I just have to wait another two weeks."

"So, you're very sure you'll win."

"Oh, yes. The only question is, by how much." He saw her expression, and sighed, slightly peeved. "You want me to go easy on him."

"I wasn't going to say anything—" she protested.

"No, but it was plain on your face." They had long since had an understanding that she wouldn't tell him how to handle things politically, as they'd had arguments about it early in their relationship when he'd done things she hadn't approved of in order to get ahead. She had to admit, however, that the way he did things worked; he was, after all, about to become Minister.

"I have to treat him as if he were anyone else," he said. He could tell that she already knew what he would say, but he felt entitled to say it anyway. "If I went easy on him, I wouldn't get the respect I need to function the way I need to. Not only that, but fringe people need to be shown that you don't challenge someone to a Choosing unless you're really ready to play. Thrashing him will make others think twice about doing what he's doing in the future."

Shifting into full acting mode, she looked down and nodded. "I do see what you mean. It's just too bad it has to be that way." What she felt was that it didn't really have to be that way, but that *he* had to be that way. She'd talked to enough Ministry wives at social functions (and a few were friends, including Madeline Bright) to know that not everyone was

like her husband when it came to politics. Some men drew a line regarding what they would and would not do; a few were even honorable, after a fashion. Usually what her husband did didn't bother her quite so much, because the men he attacked were themselves morally suspect. This time, however, it disturbed her, because Arthur Weasley was as moral as they got, but her husband would treat him the same way as he would a scoundrel. She'd long ago made her peace with the unsavory aspects of what he did, but in this situation, it was inevitable that she'd feel twinges of regret. She changed the subject and tried to put it out of her mind.

Drake was as fascinated by the turn events had taken as the crowd at the Atrium earlier. He'd given Joe a difficult assignment; to even get off an accurate shot with so many people around wasn't easy. Joe was strong enough by then that he probably could have beaten any anti-Disapparation field an Auror put up, but so well-camouflaged by the crowd was Joe that the Aurors were taken totally by surprise. Drake had known there was an excellent chance that the curse would not hit its mark, though he'd thought a Killing Curse shield from an Auror would be the thing to stop it. The point was not specifically to kill Trent, but to shake up him and the wizarding world with such an audacious attempt. Drake thought it might very well have struck its target if not for Potter.

Potter. Clearly this was his effort to get out of the straitjacket Drake had placed him in, and Drake knew it might have worked. Drake didn't know how long it would take for the baby Potter phoenix to grow up, but he knew it could be as little as two months. He had to assume that was the deadline; he knew he would be running a great risk if his activities continued past that time. Clever of Potter, thought Drake, to do it there, with two hundred people around. If I'd fired the curse, or was around when Joe did, and there were

only a few people there, I might have been able to disrupt the ashes and prevent the rebirth. Drake shrugged off as coincidence the irony of Harry's choice of whom to save; he assumed that anyone would have sufficed for Harry's purposes.

Drake was also fascinated by the event leading up to that: Weasley's very surprising challenge. It had been necessary to have Hugo explain to him how the Choosing worked; he was reasonably well-informed about English wizarding politics, but this was more like arcane trivia.

"So," he said, "Weasley has almost no chance to win this election."

"It's difficult to imagine the circumstances under which he'd win," agreed Hugo.

"Why do you think he's doing it?"

Hugo thought, then shook his head. "I can't think of any kind of reason. It makes no sense."

"Could Weasley have something on Trent? He waits until two days before, unleashes it, and that's that?"

"No. Not that he couldn't, but he wouldn't. I can't say that one hundred percent, but I'm pretty sure. Maybe he could justify it on the grounds that Trent would be a terrible Minister, but in doing such a thing, Arthur would be no better than Trent, and he wouldn't do it if only for that reason."

"Is there anything that could bring Trent down?"

"Not that I know of. His son is gay, but that shouldn't drag Trent to defeat even if it came out. People wouldn't oppose

Trent just because of that, they wouldn't blame him."

"This isn't public. You know this because of your senses?"

Hugo nodded. "I'm told that my attractiveness is above-average, and when a woman meets me and finds me attractive, I know it immediately. If a man finds me attractive, I know that, too. I probably know more gay men in wizarding England than anyone who's not gay."

Drake chuckled without humor. "Very strange. So you can't even speculate on why Weasley did this?"

Hugo shook his head. "Lacking any other information, I would take his explanation at face value. But I got the vague sense from watching him that there's information about this that he's not sharing, some part of the reason he did this."

Drake nodded. "I'd like to know what that is, but security's going to be very tight for him and his inner circle, and I'm not going to take the chance of being found out. I can live with the mystery for two weeks."

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 12: Arthur starts his underdog campaign defending himself from personal attacks by Trent supporters; Pensieve memories are made public that cast Harry's friends, especially Hermione, in a very poor light; the seventh-year Slytherins try to cope with their loss, with a little help from Luna.

From Chapter 12: "Professor, if the memories aren't accurate, why don't you just say so?"

Hermione repressed a sigh. "Because I'm being accused anonymously, and such accusations don't deserve to be

addressed. If the person who brought forth these alleged memories came forward, described how he came to be in possession of them, and explained his motivation for doing so, there would be a better reason for me to answer them."

"A very impressive dance routine," remarked Trent loudly.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

Three hours after the press conference, there was another large gathering, this one in the living room of Harry's home. Harry had it set so that its apparent space could be magically expanded, which Ginny had done; it could now comfortably contain twenty people. Present were the entire Weasley family, Neville, Hermione, Pansy, Archibald, Colin, Dudley, Luna, and Kingsley, who had just arrived.

"I want to make it very clear to everyone," said Kingsley, "that I am not here, and I never was."

Frowning, Fred turned to George. "Did you hear something?"

"No," George assured him. "You're having auditory hallucinations."

Amused, Kingsley continued. "You all know that the Aurors would dearly love to see Arthur win, but you also know that the Aurors can't be seen even remotely to be taking sides. Trent would latch onto the least little thing to suggest that we were displaying a preference. Except for Ron and Neville; we think everyone won't be surprised that they have a preference. Partly for that reason, Arthur, they'll be your two Auror bodyguards throughout these two weeks. Trent gets two as well, of course." He glanced at Luna. "By the way, are you here as a reporter, or as yourself?"

With a smile at the phrasing, she said, "As far as the Prophet's concerned, as a reporter. I've been in Arthur's office for a few weeks, and talked to him for a long time, so they decided I should sort of continue that. I'll be with him

wherever he goes, even private conversations, planning sessions, things like that. In return, he gets to veto anything I might write. After the Choosing, I'll write a much longer 'behind the scenes' piece. I'll also be working on the one I was originally assigned to write, as what Arthur does will now be considered bigger news. On top of that, I will secretly be doubling as a campaign assistant." Doing no more than a normal witch could do, she added silently.

"In what way?" asked Bill.

She distributed some parchment that she'd brought. At the top of each one, in large letters, was written, 'Arthur Weasley: Man of Honor'. "I used some of the information from my interviews, and my observations. After the press conference, I went home and worked on this. You're going to need a campaign pamphlet; this is a draft of one. Mostly a biography, a slightly flattering one."

A few chuckled as they read. "Yeah, just slightly flattering," agreed Ron. "It sounds like Dad's a lock for the next new Chocolate Frog card."

"You forgot the time he spent with Zeus and the others on Mount Olympus," pointed out George.

"And that he taught Harry everything he knows," added Fred.

"Sorry, I'll put those into the next draft," said Luna agreeably.

"This should do fine," said a smiling Molly. "Thank you, Luna, this is very sweet. Only two weeks around him, but you captured him very well."

"I'm impressed that you did this in only two hours," added Colin. It had really been six hours, but she declined to correct him.

"It needs a picture, of course," suggested Dudley. "One of just him, and one of the whole family, especially with Harry and James. We have to remind people of his connection to Harry."

"I'm not sure how comfortable I am doing that," said Arthur.

"You don't have to, we will," offered George.

"Come on, Dad, you know he'd be fine with it," added Ginny. "He'd campaign for you himself, if he wasn't off being a baby phoenix."

"We all have our things we have to do," said Fred. Brightening, he asked, "Hey, Pansy, Hermione, is there any chance we can get your phoenix friends to make a few appearances on Dad's behalf?"

It took them a few seconds to realize he was serious.

"Absolutely not," said Hermione sternly.

"You know how much we want him to win," added Pansy, "but we just can't use phoenixes for that. They would do it if we asked them to, but it would be hugely inappropriate."

"I wouldn't allow it anyway, of course," said Arthur. Looking at the twins, he shook his head. "I can only imagine what you two are going to do in the name of getting me Chosen. I only hope it doesn't cost me more support than it'll get me."

"Dad! You wound us," protested Fred.

"Somehow, I doubt it," muttered Arthur.

"We were planning on taking on the task of uncovering dirt on Trent, the skeletons in his closet," said George.

Arthur looked at George suspiciously. "You're kidding, I hope."

"He'll do it to you," said George, serious.

"I did mention that to your father when we talked about this yesterday," said Dentus. "He pointed out, reasonably, that his whole campaign is based on the idea that he isn't a typical politician. He's going to emphasize that he won't do that, and we'll defend him as best we can against whatever they do. With any luck, it'll backfire, and emphasize Arthur's point."

"I'm serious about this," said Arthur, looking around. "There will be none of that sort of thing coming from this campaign. You can criticize Trent on substantive grounds, things he's done at the Ministry, his hypocrisy, his opposing Harry going into the Ring, that kind of thing. That's okay. But no name-calling, no insults, no looking for something to slander him with."

"Now, as Archibald mentioned, we can expect him to throw mud at me. He won't do most of it personally; it'll be done by his supporters. He tried hard to smear Bright five years ago, but fortunately Bright had lived quite an exemplary life, and nothing stuck. I myself don't recall having committed any major crimes, but there are some things I will have to explain. For example, owning that flying car that Ron and Harry took to Hogwarts."

"I'll explain that," offered Ron. "I'll say it was all Harry's fault."

Arthur nodded humorously. "That won't be the issue, of course, it'll be just that I did it in the first place. How I am about Muggles will obviously be a big theme of theirs, they'll want to make me look like some weirdo. That shouldn't be too hard, but that's just for openers."

"Our response to that," added Dentus, "should be along the lines that Arthur feels that the wizarding world is too insular, that we need to be aware of the world around us. Arthur is farsighted and forward-thinking; we'll hope for it to be seen as a policy interest rather than a quirky hobby. What he's done at the Muggle Liaison office underlines that point, and you may also want to point to Dudley's discovering of that photo, and the close call that was avoided. Explain that the danger of discovery by Muggles is higher than it's ever been, and that Arthur is the man who can help prevent that.

"Now, there are a few things that everyone needs to be aware of. One of them is related to the fact that with a Choosing in progress, the Ministry is no longer stymied. For these two weeks, the power of the Minister lies with Arthur and Trent; anything they agree on can be implemented. We can expect Trent to issue challenges to Arthur, saying, 'I support such-and-such; I call on you to support it as well, and it can be put into effect immediately.' He'll choose issues and frame the proposed laws in such a way to cause Arthur maximum discomfort, to do what will be wrong but popular, knowing that Arthur won't want to do it. We have to be ready to respond to such things."

Dudley spoke up. "That reminds me of something I wanted to mention. Arthur says you don't have this in the wizarding world, but a few things from Muggle politics could be helpful. One of them is something they call rapid-response. The idea is that as soon as Trent makes an accusation, we come up with a response very quickly. You don't have

twenty-four-hour TV like in the Muggle world, but it's still a good idea."

"Yes, I agree," said Dentus. "There needs to be a place to get the most current information, and it should be here. There's no need to worry about spies, since the house detects Polyjuice users, and we all have Apparation and fireplace authorization. Ginny, I was thinking that since you won't be going out much, for safety reasons for you and James, it could be your responsibility to keep track of the latest information from both sides, and supply it to people as needed. Now, as I was saying, we will be making leadership challenges to Trent's side as well; developing those will be one of my main responsibilities. The first one, which I quite like," he added with a smile, "is that Arthur will challenge Trent to sign a measure which will provide immediate Ministry funding to help the people in Diagon Alley who lost their businesses in the dragon attack, or whose businesses suffered extensive damage. I know from my Ministry contacts that Trent was planning, in his first speech as Minister, to unveil just such a proposal. He wanted to do it himself; politicians love to be seen giving money to popular causes, they look like great benefactors and it helps their popularity. Trent won't want to do this in cooperation with Arthur; he'll want to do it himself and take all credit, so he'll look for ways to avoid agreeing. In the meantime, Arthur and the rest of us can beat him up for not helping those poor unfortunate victims, and so forth. That'll be a big early theme."

"I'm not crazy about this," added Arthur, slightly abashed. "It seems too much like making political hay out of misfortune. But the fact is he should agree, and shouldn't make those people wait two weeks to get Ministry help just so he can take credit for himself. I'll do it, since it's what I would do anyway. Here, it just so happens that good policy is

also good politics. I want everyone to be clear that this isn't only for campaign purposes."

"I have a question," said Ron. "I won't really be asked, I suppose, since I'll be protecting you, but what's the answer we're supposed to give when people ask us why you challenged Trent to the Choosing when it's so likely you'll lose? Do we just go with the 'he wants to give people a choice' thing, or do we get more specific about why Trent is so bad?"

Dentus answered. "Just give the choice answer, and that Arthur would be a better Minister. Only talk about Trent's bad points if someone asks specifically what's wrong with him. And always, always challenge them on the assumption that Arthur's bound to lose. Don't accept that as a premise. I know it's highly likely, but really, anything is possible, and to be perceived as a preordained loser wouldn't even allow his campaign to ever have a chance. This should be a big theme: 'you might be surprised at what can happen if people have a chance to get a Minister who thinks about their interests above his own political interests.' Turn Arthur not being a standard politician into an asset. You can also mention that the Choosing is the only way for someone who isn't a traditional politician to have a shot at being Minister, so Arthur is putting himself on the line for them, which he's done before, in the fights against evil. That kind of thing."

"So Ginny's not going to campaign?" asked Dudley.

She looked at him unhappily. "I want to, but I think there's still someone out there with a grudge against Harry, and James and I are the next best targets. Even if I didn't mind the risk to myself, I have to protect myself for Harry and James' sake. So I'm going to stay home for most of the two weeks, and mainly just give fireplace interviews, and

interviews to Luna. I'll probably go out with Dad in the last two days. I know I can be useful because I can speak for Harry better than anyone. But Mum and Dad don't want me to be too big a target, and I can understand that."

"There's one more thing everyone should know," said Dentus. "I will be out some of the time, but most of the time I'll be here. I'm taking a two-week leave from my duties as Hogwarts' History of Magic teacher, and Amelia Bones will be filling in for me. She supports Arthur, but she doesn't want to campaign for him, because she feels that Trent is far more likely to win, and she'll have to deal with him in the future. She's just going to sit this campaign out. What she's doing is helpful, though, since it'll allow me to help with the campaign full-time."

"Speaking of which," said Arthur, "Dudley, Colin, I want you at your jobs for the next two weeks as usual. No campaigning. The situation is still precarious, and I need your eyes on it. I'll be in from time to time as well, I don't think I can campaign all the time. Understand?"

Reluctantly, they nodded. "I almost wonder why we bother, since no one's going to try to find out if a wizard was responsible for the sarin gas thing," said Dudley. "I know, partly because of what I found the other day. I'd rather campaign, though."

"If you find convincing evidence, we'll do something about it," Arthur assured them. Aha, a challenge, thought Dudley.

Luna was pleased that everyone had liked her glowing biography of Arthur, and she was happy to be able to contribute to what Arthur was doing in a way that didn't require any particular magical ability. He'll probably still lose, she thought, but at least I can help a good cause. She

fleetingly wished that she could use her special abilities to just make him Minister, but she knew that it would be very wrong, and that such thoughts would fade as she became accustomed to her new abilities.

She was curious as to what had happened to Harry. What was he doing now? How were the phoenixes taking care of him? How does it work, when phoenixes die and are reborn? After Harry had become a phoenix, Luna had worked out that the First was also one, and had appeared young because he had died and been reborn. Clearly they kept their memories, since he remembered Dumbledore. Now very curious, she decided there was only one way to find out.

In her bedroom, she focused on becoming an Animagus, on becoming a phoenix. It happened in a very short time, as it had with Harry. She felt herself changing, and her first impression was that the room had become a lot bigger. She took flight and teleported outside. It was dark, but it didn't matter. She loved the feeling of flying, and she noticed the connection to the spiritual realm that Harry had talked about. She noticed it faster than he had, because she had more experience with it. She sent out impressions. Are there any other phoenixes around?

Of course, came back the response. We are always here. We welcome you.

Where are you? I'd like to see you.

Luna got an image of the Earth as seen from far above, viewing the section she knew was the southern part of the Pacific Ocean. The view approached the surface until it reached a small island. She got the impressions that humans didn't know about it. She now knew how to get there; she

teleported, and was soon flying low in the air, in a bright morning sky. She flew down and landed among dozens of other phoenixes. She marveled at the beauty of the scene.

Where is Harry?

You can see him if you want, but he cannot communicate with you. He is still too young, just an infant.

Luna knew a phoenix was sending the impressions, but she had no idea which one.

I am the one who is bonded to Harry as a human.

Fawkes. What do you mean, he is an infant? Is he still Harry?

He will be who he was. He must grow first.

He can't send impressions?

His mind is not yet developed enough. Only the most basic thoughts are possible.

What happened to his memories, his knowledge, all that he is?

It is there. Not within him; it is with us.

How is it with you?

Luna struggled to comprehend the images and impressions Fawkes sent her. She might not have understood it as a human, but as a phoenix, it made sense after a minute. Phoenixes possessed a group consciousness in addition to their own individual consciousnesses. If one phoenix knew something important, every phoenix knew it. Each phoenix contributed to the group consciousness and could access it. Harry's consciousness and memories, both as a human and a

phoenix, were being stored in the phoenixes' group consciousness. As his body grew from infancy and his mind matured, more and more of his consciousness and memories would gravitate to his body, until his body matured, at which point it would all return.

How long will it take?

About two revolutions of the moon around the earth. Included in the impression was the sense that phoenixes wouldn't think about how long anything took, or think about time. It would take how long it took. They indulged Luna because they knew humans thought in terms of time.

Luna stayed for a while exchanging impressions, as Harry had the first time he had become a phoenix. Completely wrapped up in the experience, she gradually noticed that it was becoming twilight, which meant that it was probably morning in England. She was supposed to spend the day with Arthur, and she hadn't slept.

She changed back to human form to consider what to do. After a minute, the solution occurred to her. Like Harry, she could do anything that could be done by magic. That included artifacts, since Harry had copied the effect of the time-stopping artifact. She remembered another artifact, one that had figured prominently in a story Harry had told her once, of how he rescued his godfather from a death sentence by dementors. It was called a Time-Turner. Focusing on the effect she wanted, she propelled herself back in time to just after she became a phoenix and left her home. She knew that she could do this safely so long as she didn't attempt to cause changes in the timeline she had already observed, but since she had spent all that time as a phoenix, it clearly wouldn't be an issue. She teleported to

her bedroom, then remembered one more thing she'd planned to do.

She Apparated to the living room of Harry's home; her remote eye told her that Ginny was in the kitchen, having a snack before bed. Ginny looked up in surprise as Luna walked in. "Luna! I thought you'd gone."

"I had, but I remembered something I wanted to ask you." Luna hesitated, then said, "I was wondering if I could borrow that book Professor Dumbledore wrote Harry. I think I could particularly use it right now."

Luna could see the caution in Ginny's eyes. "I don't know... I trust you, but I don't like the idea of lending it out at all, and especially when Harry's not around to have a say."

Luna nodded. "I understand. It's just that... Professor Snape thought it would be helpful to me. He said I should tell you that it was his idea that I read it."

Ginny made no attempt to hide the surprise on her face. Luna could tell that Ginny had a connection to Snape that most people didn't know about. She could also tell that Ginny was very curious what Luna's connection to him was, but wouldn't ask, for the same reasons she wouldn't want others to ask about hers. Finally, Ginny nodded. "Wait here. I'll go get it."

The lights were off, and he'd said goodnight to Molly, but Arthur lay in bed awake. He had risked his life before, but there was something even more intimidating about the process he'd submitted himself to. He would be on display, almost to the maximum extent possible, for the next two weeks. He normally worked in anonymity, and he liked it that way. He had little experience in soliciting people's approval, and he would have to do that, with great intensity.

Every aspect of his life would be up for public review. He would be attacked without mercy, and so would his family. He would have to deal with it calmly, not lose his temper like Trent had when Arthur had announced his challenge. Fortunately, staying even-tempered was one of his strong points. He wryly glanced at his sleeping wife. Married to her, he thought, it has to be. He tried to put it all out of his mind, but it was another hour before he fell asleep.

Dentus awoke at six o'clock in unfamiliar surroundings, but soon remembered where he was; he was in one of the guest rooms in Harry's home. He and Arthur had agreed that it would be too inconvenient for him to have to always enter and leave Hogwarts, from which one couldn't Apparate.

He got dressed and Apparated to the offices of the Daily Prophet. He couldn't get the early edition of the Prophet delivered while he stayed at Harry's home, since no one knew where it was, and he didn't want to wait for an owl. At the Prophet, he recognized most of the people in the lobby, who'd come for the same reason as him. Most worked in the Ministry, where Dentus had spent most of his career before becoming a Hogwarts professor five years ago.

"Undersecretary!" greeted a man named Edward Stratton. Stratton was a department head, though not an undersecretary, as Dentus had been. Most Ministry employees Dentus ran into who weren't on a first-name basis with him addressed him by his old title. Stratton had once worked for Dentus, so they knew each other fairly well.

"Edward," said Dentus, shaking his hand. "Good to see you."

"It's been, what, a year?" said Stratton. "Hogwarts is pretty secluded, I don't see you around much."

"I poke my head in every now and then, but don't roam the halls too much," agreed Dentus. "I did retire, after all."

"You quit in protest, but let's not nit-pick," replied Stratton humorously. "So, you couldn't talk Weasley out of doing this?"

"I did try," admitted Dentus. "He's determined. I admire him for it, given what he's up against."

"Did you tell him there's no chance he can win?"

Dentus became aware of a few people loitering around; he knew that whatever he said would probably get back to the Ministry. "Honestly, Edward, I don't know that there's no chance he can win. I think his background of fighting Voldemort helps him a lot, with what's going on now. I think people will respect someone who's actually stuck his neck on the line. You never know what people are going to do, and it's been a very long time since there was a Choosing."

Stratton smiled a little. "Most everyone thinks you have something big on Trent you're going to drop two days before."

"We're not doing that. If anyone in our camp does, he'll be shoved out. Arthur's made that very clear."

Stratton shook his head, amazed. "It's like you're fighting with both hands tied behind your back. It's going to be a question of how much punishment you can take."

"Not exactly like that. We're hoping that people will respect that, and give us credit."

Stratton grunted. "I wouldn't bet on that. Speaking of which, the goblins are already taking action on it. Want to guess

the opening over/under for Weasley's vote?"

"Hmmm... I'll say, thirty-four."

"No, it's twenty-five."

"Twenty-five?" repeated Dentus, incredulous. "They must be kidding. I'll take some of that. Seriously, I'd put a few hundred Galleons on it." The goblins would take even-money bets on what percentage of the magical energy would eventually go to Arthur; they clearly assumed that half of the betting money would say that Arthur wouldn't break twenty-five percent, and half would say he would. "Do you think the goblins are taking into consideration that we should get most of the love-magic vote?"

"I'd imagine they are, they're not stupid," agreed Stratton. "But you have to figure that at the beginning, they're going to err on the low side. They're more afraid of too much money on the favorite than too much on the underdog. It'll be interesting to see what direction further betting pushes it, if any."

"This is a great opportunity for anyone who wants to bet on Arthur," suggested Dentus. "The money's going to disproportionately go towards Trent, just because most of the people with the big money know him."

"And how ruthless he is."

"Yes, there is that," conceded Dentus. "But I really do think that'll help us. It doesn't look good to maul a fluffy bunny rabbit."

Stratton chuckled. "Maybe. But right now, I think people are in the mood for someone who doesn't mind doing some mauling."

"Just as long as they maul the right people." Dentus accepted his copy of the paper, and paid. "Well, I must be off. Good to see you again."

"You too," said Stratton. "If you're serious about betting, you want to go to Gringotts soon, before the line changes." Both Disapparated.

Dentus Apparated in Harry's home, and walked to the kitchen. To his surprise, on one of the long counters—there was no shortage of counter space in Harry's kitchen; Molly had seen to that when the home had been designed—there was a row of plates, each one with a meal's full of food: sausage, bacon, eggs, and toast. A Warming spell had clearly been placed on them so they wouldn't go cold.

Ginny walked into the kitchen and saw his expression. "That's from Hogwarts. Hermione's contribution is that she got the Hogwarts house-elves to put together some extra meals for us, since this is going to be the campaign headquarters, and Mum and I will have better things to do than cook and go shopping. We'll be getting ten breakfasts, lunches, and dinners every day, and there's lots of drinks and snacks in the fridge."

Dentus smiled. "I'd bet the Prophet would love to find out about that."

"Hermione explained to the house-elves that it's one of the secrets they need to keep," agreed Ginny.

Dentus took a plate and sat down to eat and read the paper. The front page was split in two, vertically, down the center: the headline for the left side was, "Arthur Weasley Challenges Trent To Choosing," while the right side read, "Harry Potter Saves Trent, Reborn As Phoenix." He spent the next half hour reading the paper carefully and thinking

about what he hoped the next day's headline would read, knowing that those in Trent's camp were doing the same.

It annoyed Trent that Weasley would spend the next two weeks more safely than he would, even though he now had Auror protection. He declined to have the Aurors stay in his bedroom, though the Aurors' Apparation detection would now focus on his home, and any Apparation in his home between ten p.m. and six a.m. would instantly bring four Aurors, as well as the two that would be in the next room. He didn't know that he and the other undersecretaries had been under such protection at night since the two undersecretaries were killed; Kingsley hadn't wanted to give Trent the satisfaction of knowing. If Trent wanted to play rough, Kingsley could, too.

Trent fielded fireplace calls from aides and Ministry supporters as he ate; Anne barely got to talk to him at all. She heard an aide remind him that they would have strategy sessions in his office twice a day, at eight a.m. and five p.m. The times were chosen because the Prophet would have an extra evening edition throughout the two weeks of the Choosing; it would only be four or eight pages, containing all the day's Choosing news, and its deadline would be four-thirty. The meetings would be timed to discuss how they wanted the next edition's articles to read.

He gave her the usual perfunctory kiss on the cheek, and Disapparated. An idea came into her head; she would have preferred it hadn't. A long time ago, shortly after they'd been married, he'd given her a gift. It was two pictures of them, in charmed frames. One would be kept at home, and the other, in his office. By tapping the frame with a wand, each would be able to hear what was happening in the room where the other picture was. They could make an appointment to talk at certain times, or one could listen to

the other go about their business if they wanted to. It had seemed very nice and romantic at the time, but the utility of the frames had fallen into disuse, even if the frames hadn't. She knew that at least once, he had used them from home to listen in on aides' conversations about him held in his office, and she hadn't liked him using them for that. Now she considered using them for a similar reason. Part of her didn't like the idea, but she felt she should know what her husband was planning on doing. She felt like an unwilling accomplice in whatever he was planning, and that willful ignorance was as bad as complicity; worse, in that it was cowardly. She tapped the picture with her wand.

At eight exactly, she heard voices. Her husband spoke first. "All right. The first challenge I'm going to make is the one we talked about last night, about the Aurors. The talking points, remember, are that the Aurors' budget will be increased. We don't mention the two Ministry observers who the law would empower to walk around the Aurors' compound, and if the press does, you know the routine."

"They're there to help the Aurors, make sure they have what they need, that sort of thing," said an aide. "Weasley will oppose it, and we say he's not doing what he needs to, to help the Aurors."

"Especially in this dangerous time, people being killed, et cetera et cetera," said Trent. "Now, the other thing we talked about last night. We have to lose no time going after Weasley personally. Can we make anything of the fact that he and Percy weren't speaking when Percy was killed? Bad father, not supporting his son, like that?"

Listening, Anne closed her eyes and cringed; it was even worse than she'd feared. Bad enough to use a family tragedy like that, but worse was her husband's tone. This was a

routine matter, just another piece of business. Anne imagined the pain it could cause Molly Weasley, a woman she knew only vaguely from social functions, but respected.

"Unless there's something to hang our hats on, we have to be very careful with that one," said an aide. "So far, there's nothing firm; the best we can do is some whispering, and remind people of what was going around at the time. Percy supported the Ministry, and his father ostracized him for it, partly because his father was jealous of Percy's rapid rise in the Ministry. That was Percy's story, at least, but it works for us. Low-key, we know who to go to. The most gossipy Ministry wives."

"Anne won't get involved in this, I guess," said another aide.

"No, but I wouldn't want her to anyway, it's better if her fingerprints aren't on anything to do with this. Also, she's happy not to know about things like this, and I'm happy not to tell her. I don't need the grief. Anyway, work on the kids, especially the two youngest. If we can get anything on them —"

"Roger, I think that's a very bad idea," interrupted the most senior aide. "Potter is probably coming back, and he's got magical power coming out of every orifice. We're talking about his best friend and his wife. If we lay them out, he'll make it his personal mission to destroy us. He could make any of us disappear with the flick of a wrist."

"He's not going to do that. He can't use that power to do things he knows are wrong, you know that."

"If we go after his wife and friend, his notion of what's wrong might get very flexible. Do a risk-benefit analysis. It's just not worth it."

Trent audibly sighed. "All right. Nothing personal, though if you get something really good, bring it to me. But public stuff is legitimate. I'll want to know why Ron didn't get one of those shields up around me yesterday, and of course we insinuate that it was because he preferred me dead."

"It doesn't make much sense, since Potter saved you."

"Sure, it can. Noble phoenix, crass human. Needless to say, we don't come close to criticizing Potter. But we're going after Granger, too, and not personal, either. We have a few things on her, but not just yet. First we get Weasley to say how great she is, how he supports her, which he will. Get him on record; we do that today. This morning I'll say I think Hogwarts needs a new headmaster. Not attack her directly yet, just that she's too young. Make him defend her.

"And be sure to get the Ministry mobilized. That's the job of the other undersecretaries who support me, but make sure they do it. If anyone in the Ministry says a word about how they prefer Weasley, or even that they're ambivalent, I want to know about it, because that person's career will go nowhere fast. All right, let's go."

The picture frame was silent, and Anne Trent held her head in her hands. He was right, she thought, I didn't want to know that. But now I do, so what do I do?

"What's going on?" asked Arthur, bewildered, as they walked into Harry's living room. "I'm out in Diagon Alley, talking to people, actually doing fairly well, I thought, and you pull me back here?" Ron, Neville, and Luna were also present, as all three would be shadowing him for the next two weeks.

"Trust me, Arthur," said Dentus. "Molly?"

"Arthur... a half hour ago, I got a fireplace call at the Burrow, from Anne Trent."

Arthur's eyebrows went high. "What was it? An offer, some kind of back-channel communication?"

Very serious, she shook her head. "She overheard her husband talking to his aides, doing campaign planning. She said they're planning on going after our whole family, making issues of whatever they can find, no matter how personal. She said they're going to start with Percy, to see if they can embarrass you somehow, about the situation when he died."

Arthur was solemn. "Archibald did tell us that that would happen, we understood that. But why did she tell you that?"

"She talked for a while, about ten or fifteen minutes, then she got pulled away, people came to get her for campaigning. But the gist of it was that she hates that he's doing that, she feels it's immoral. She said the least she could do was warn us about what would happen. We could develop a response, maybe discourage Trent from doing that kind of thing."

Arthur looked at Dentus, silently soliciting his opinion. "Of course, there's the question of whether she's genuine. Only Molly can make that call, and she thinks it is. It's certainly plausible; Anne Trent is well-regarded in the political community, as you both know. She's not arrogant or driven, like her husband is. It could well be genuine."

"I really think it is, Arthur," said Molly. "It just sounded right. It was in her eyes, her voice. She said not to get her wrong, that she loves her husband and wants him to be Minister. She said that he expects to win by a big margin, so she doesn't feel that guilty in telling me something like this."

She'd rather he didn't do it, but it's not something she can talk him out of. She thinks it's wrong to attack people who don't deserve it just for political gain. I told her I agree, of course, and thanked her for what she told me. She said that if she hears about anything else personal that he plans, she'll let us know."

"Molly's told me that she also mentioned Hermione, that she's a big target," added Dentus. "He's counting on you to back her up, and then will take a big swing at her that could hurt you."

"Well, I am going to back her up, obviously," said Arthur. "She's done a great job as headmistress."

"Of course she has, but the Skeeter and Umbridge things are lurking out there, and someone threatened her with a Pensieve memory. Some things could make her look quite bad."

"Those things happened when she was fourteen, fifteen," argued Arthur. "She can defend herself against that, and I can just say that it has no bearing on now, that she's performing well as headmistress, and dismiss them as politically motivated attacks. I'm not going to hang Hermione out to dry."

"The things you just said are true, Arthur, but it's less a question of their truth than the perception they cause—"

"Yes, I know, most people make judgments on the basis of outward appearances, not stopping to look beneath the surface or to consider the complexity of the situation. But what should I do, criticize Hermione? Refuse to comment? Sorry, Archibald. Maybe this is just where he wants me to go, but I'm going there anyway."

"All right," agreed Dentus. "Look, Arthur, you know how highly I regard Hermione. I'm just telling you what's what. I'm not going to quibble with your decisions, but I will make sure you're fully informed of their consequences."

"I know."

"Before you get back out there, one other thing. Not long ago, I put a thousand Galleons on you, with the goblins, to exceed twenty-five percent in the Choosing."

Arthur's mouth hung open slightly. "Is that legal? Or ethical?"

"Yes, and yes, as long as it's public."

"Or wise?"

Dentus grinned. "I wouldn't have done it otherwise. I think twenty-five is a bargain. I expect to win, but I don't need the money that much. I do have quite a lot more than that saved. I did it partly to make a point, and I let it be known to some of the reporters. It's my way of saying that I have confidence in your campaign, and since I'm your adviser, it hints that I know something that others don't know. That in itself might push the number higher. That number represents the expectation that the public—all right, the betting public—has of your chances. The higher that number is, the better. Perception isn't everything, but it's a lot. Support could start breaking toward you if people think you have a real chance to win. Right now, they don't think that. There isn't much you can do about that other than campaign and do your best, but again, these are the facts of the situation."

"Your betting based on inside knowledge wouldn't be unethical?"

"The only way my betting would be unethical is if I bet against you," said Dentus with a small smile. "There should be nothing I know that Trent's people don't. If there is, it just means they're not doing their jobs. Believe me, it's anything but unethical. The goblins know who I am, they could have turned me away if they wanted to. I'm only telling you this because I want you to be ready if a reporter asks you about it."

"What if a goblin asks me about it?" joked Arthur.

"Tell him that you're going to tell your friends that betting on you is a bargain."

U.S. Secretary of State Bob Rogers sat in his office, lost in thought. As he did every day, he thought of the mysterious man who'd insisted that he take a hawkish line towards Iran in his discussions with the President. The irony was that this man had gone to so much trouble, killed a young woman, and to this point it had hardly made a bit of difference. Especially after the sarin gas attack—or, ten-twelve, as it was starting to be called in the media—the President had needed no encouragement to be hawkish towards Iran. Sometimes, Rogers reflected, events take on a life of their own, and only people in true positions of power, like the President, can alter them. Even Kenneth Barclay, the British Prime Minister, was nearly powerless to affect events. All he could do was get England out of Iraq, and that would have profound consequences. England would lose what influence it had on U.S. foreign policy. Right then, it was admittedly not much, but that was because of the sarin attack. Some punitive action was favored by a majority of Americans, though not an invasion.

Davidson entered and sat. "I so hate to see a grown man beg," he said facetiously.

They had met an hour ago with the British ambassador to the U.S., who had implored them in the strongest possible terms to use restraint when dealing with Iran, which was poised to invade Iraq and involve Britain in a war which it very much did not want. "I'm sure Sir Philip would object to your characterization, but I'm not sure I would," replied Rogers with equal humor. "Then again, I don't really blame him. The 'special relationship' is stretched very thin, far too thin for comfort. I don't think he cared for it when you pointed out that if Britain had suffered such an attack, their popular opinion would be closer to ours."

"Be that as it may, we deal in facts, gentlemen, not hypotheticals," intoned Davidson, mimicking the Brit's accent. "No, he didn't like it. But he's also right, this is what we're stuck with. The President didn't give any hint of what he's thinking?"

Rogers, having just returned from a meeting with the President, shook his head. "You know he hardly ever does that. No, I don't know much more than the press; at least they get to ask him questions, even if he doesn't answer them much. 'No options are off the table,'" he muttered, repeating what the President had said the day before when answering a few reporters' questions at a photo-op. "If I'd been a reporter there, I'd have said, 'Mr. President, do you mean that the option of invading Iran, mass-raping their teenage girls, and forcibly converting them to Christianity is not off the table?'"

Davidson chuckled. "Wonder what he'd have said. Unfortunately, no reporter is that eager to lose his press pass."

"Anyway, my point is that my sense of what our president is thinking is very opaque at the moment," continued Rogers.

"If Iran were a normal country, they'd cooperate enough to give us a face-saving way to back down, not that the President would necessarily take it. But they're just as aggressive as ever. Anyway, the President just asked me if I thought that Iran was serious about its implicit threat to invade Iraq if we do any punitive bombing. I felt like telling him he'd get just as accurate an answer by asking a Ouija board. I gave all the appropriate caveats, which he hates but I do anyway, and said that I didn't think they'd really do it." Noting his subordinate's surprise, he went on, "Well, really, I don't. They have to know we'd flatten them. There'd be bombing sorties day and night. I don't think they want to suffer that kind of damage and loss of life just to make us look bad to the rest of the world."

"Well, yes, but these are religious zealots."

"Hence, the caveats. I really do miss the Soviets. We wanted to live, they wanted to live. We had something in common, we understood each other. You just can't deal with some schmuck who doesn't care. Makes my job much harder, anyway. But yes, I think that while we might have seen our presence on their doorstep as something that gave us leverage, they seem to see some leverage in it for them; they can threaten us directly in a way they otherwise couldn't. But following through on that threat is another thing entirely. We could ruin their country. I just don't see it."

Davidson nodded. "I very much hope you're right."

The day had gone roughly as Dentus had expected it to. Trent had agreed in principle to Arthur's challenge to help the Diagon Alley dragon victims, but said he would have to see the specifics of Arthur's proposal first. Dentus knew it was a delaying tactic, and so spent most of the afternoon drawing up the proposed legislation while Arthur

campaigned. To counter Trent's whispering campaign about Percy, Luna quickly wrote a Weasley family history story that would go into that evening's Prophet; it included Arthur and Molly's version of what had happened with Percy, and their great pain at his loss. They had to hope that would shame any whisperers, and counter impressions formed by those who had already heard Trent's version. Many in Arthur's campaign complimented Luna on the article, especially how fast she had written it. ("I had a lot of it done already," she had explained, telling herself that she'd have to be careful not to appear to write too fast.) Also, as expected, Trent had suggested that Hermione be replaced as Hogwarts headmistress, and Arthur had refused, saying that she was doing an excellent job.

The next day, a Saturday, Dentus again Apparated to the Prophet's office to get a copy of the morning's paper. To Dentus's surprise, the publisher of the Prophet, Bernard Callum, Apparated down to meet him. They exchanged greetings, and Callum guided him through the hallways to his office. Upon entering, Dentus saw a Pensieve sitting on Callum's desk. "I'd like you to have a look," he said solemnly.

Dentus did, and was unhappy to see that they were memories that cast Hermione in a very poor light, the ones she said she had been threatened with. One was of the meeting she'd had with Harry and Skeeter at the Burrow, which amply illustrated that Hermione had blackmailed Skeeter for two years not to write. The other was a talk the six had after Harry had discovered that Snape had killed Skeeter, a fact mentioned prominently in the talk. He left the Pensieve.

"It will save me some time and effort if you will tell Headmistress Granger that I am in possession of this," said Callum. "Needless to say, this will be described and

transcribed in the evening edition of the Prophet. She has ample time to comment before then; we will be asking her if the memories are genuine, where she believes they came from, that sort of thing. The earlier, the better."

"Where did you get this?" asked Dentus, thinking he knew.

"As you know, I won't tell you that. I will only say that I have reason to believe it did not come from the Trent campaign."

"You don't even know where it came from?" exclaimed a very surprised Dentus. "How can you even use it, not knowing where it came from? Who knows how this was obtained? The second one especially had to have been taken by force, none of the six of them would have given it up. You can't use this."

Callum looked uncomfortable, but determined. "Normally, I wouldn't. But come on, Archibald, this is genuine, it has to be. I know these can be faked, but this would have to be the best fake of all time. It rings true, both of them do. And if they are true, it means that Granger committed blackmail, and they were all knowing accomplices after the fact to murder! This is news, Archibald, and my professional judgment is that it is genuine and should be used. Granger will get every chance in the world to respond; we'll print every word she says, and the others too. We will be scrupulously fair about this. But we have to use it."

Dentus shook his head in annoyance. "Don't you find the timing coincidental, just after they baited Arthur into supporting Hermione the way they did?"

"This all apparently happened at Weasley's home, he should have known what was going on. And yes, the timing is suspicious, but it would be more suspicious if it had happened two days before the Choosing; it would have been

more damaging then. As it is, Weasley has time to distance himself from it."

He won't, thought Dentus. As he left Callum's office, he started considering the best way to handle the situation. He would have to go to Hogwarts before breakfast.

Four hours later, Hermione was somber and focused as she walked through the Atrium to the spot where she would meet the magical press. At what point, she asked herself, do your past mistakes stop coming back to haunt you? One of the two memories in the Pensieve implicated her in actual misconduct at the age of fourteen, well before the age at which one was considered fully responsible for one's actions. The second, from when she was nearly seventeen, showed her doing something that appeared criminal and morally wrong, if one didn't know the circumstances. The only consolation of the stressful circumstances at the time, besides the support of her friends, had been that the incidents weren't publicly known. Now, five years later, they were. She knew that no matter how she explained, she wouldn't be able to make people—most of whom would have only a surface account of what happened and wouldn't read her detailed comments, if she gave them—understand what had truly been happening. Even after all we did, she thought, they'd still sit in judgment of me, of all of us.

She stood and faced the four reporters who had come to hear her; there were also quite a few people in the Atrium. A few had come to hear her account of what was already spreading through rumor, and many just happened to be passing through on their usual daily business. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, she saw Roger Trent and some of his assistants walk into the Atrium, obviously to hear her speak. Great, she thought, trying to keep her disgust and

anger off of her face. Still, she would change nothing of what she planned to say.

"Good morning. This morning, I discovered that the Daily Prophet is in possession of a Pensieve that contains memories which purport to show events of the time when my friends and I were fighting Voldemort. Questions have been raised as to whether the memories are genuine, whether the events depicted actually occurred. My answer to these questions is simply that I will not answer such questions. Pensieve memories can be faked; legally speaking, they are considered to be no more than testimony. I'm not going to spend my life responding to any allegations anyone, especially anonymously in such a case as this, cares to make—"

"You're going to have to do better than that, Professor," said Trent from where he stood, thirty feet away from her. "This isn't just someone on a street corner raving. These are memories which are obviously genuine, showing you acting in a manner inconsistent with the law. You are the Hogwarts headmistress; parents are entrusting their children to you. They deserve an explanation."

She gave him a cold glare before continuing. "I was going to say, these allegations are almost certainly politically motivated, as Undersecretary Trent's presence and comments amply make clear. I have been obstructing his plans to control Hogwarts, and he has sought my removal for that reason. I do not doubt that he will continue to do so, using whatever pretext presents itself—"

"I seek your removal because you are obviously unfit to be headmistress—"

"I'm not here to debate you," she interrupted him, raising her voice but remaining calm; yet again she wondered if she would have managed to keep her temper if not for Flora.

"I'm here to make a statement, and I'll thank you not to interrupt further.

"As I was saying, I do not plan to comment on the accuracy of what is in the Pensieve, or the events they purport to represent. Perhaps one day I'll write a book about those times, and present the events in the correct perspective, as accurately as I can remember them. In the meantime, I do not plan to answer allegations. I will take a few of your questions."

"Professor Granger, without referring directly to what's in the Pensieve, did you in fact blackmail Rita Skeeter to cause her to stop writing for the Prophet?"

"You *are* referring to what's in the Pensieve, and I've already said that I'm not going to respond to allegations for which there's no evidence. Yes?" She motioned to another reporter.

"Professor, if the memories aren't accurate, why don't you just say so?"

She repressed a sigh. "Because I'm being accused anonymously, and such accusations don't deserve to be addressed. If the person who brought forth these alleged memories came forward, described how he came to be in possession of them, and explained his motivation for doing so, there would be a better reason for me to answer them."

"A very impressive dance routine," remarked Trent loudly.

"Professor Granger, Undersecretary Trent said a half hour ago that if you did not adequately explain yourself, he would call on parents to remove their students from Hogwarts until

such time as you are removed as headmistress. Do you have any comment?"

"Yes, I would hope that parents won't jeopardize their children's magical education to further one man's political agenda. Attending Hogwarts is a privilege, not an obligation. Parents may remove their children, but once gone, the children may not return. Parents should think carefully about that fact."

"That's a rule that will be changed when I am Minister," said Trent, as the reporters' heads swiveled in his direction.

"There is no reason it must be that way."

"I would urge parents not to gamble with their children's futures on such a statement. But since you insist on interrupting, Undersecretary, let me ask you a question. It's expected that Harry Potter will be human again in two months, after dying as a phoenix to save your life. I am only the temporary headmistress; he is truly the headmaster. Will he still be the headmaster if you become Minister?"

"Assuming he is not adversarial to the Ministry, yes," responded Trent. Hermione's Legilimency detected a lie, but since she wanted that kept a secret, she couldn't call him on it.

"You mean, if he accepts Ministry control over Hogwarts, which I know he will not." She turned to the journalists; Flora appeared and settled on Hermione's shoulder. "Let me tell you something, and you can believe this. Harry's been my close friend for eleven years, and for the last four, we've shared a mental link that lets us understand each other's thinking very clearly. Even though Undersecretary Trent positioned himself to benefit politically four years ago if Harry and I died in the Ring, Harry still saved his life two

days ago, because it was the right thing to do. But you can take my word on this: Harry will not return to Hogwarts unless he is free to run it with absolutely no outside interference, with a staff of his choosing. The fact that Undersecretary Trent is trying to remove me, who Harry entrusted with this responsibility, is evidence that Undersecretary Trent has no confidence in Harry's judgment. I suggest that parents consider what this means for Hogwarts if Undersecretary Trent becomes Minister. Thank you." The reporters tried to shout more questions, but Hermione Disapparated, as Flora disappeared at the same time.

"Well, Hermione, that was amazing," said Dentus happily as he held up a copy of the evening Prophet seven hours later in the Hogwarts staff room. "Look at this headline: 'Granger: Potter Won't Return To Hogwarts If Trent Is Minister.' This morning, I was sure the headline would be about what you were accused of. That's some excellent political jujitsu, especially from an amateur."

"Thanks, but he walked right into it, really. Am I wrong in thinking that he massively overreached with that threat about parents pulling their children? It's as if he forgot that Harry would be coming back in two months." I hope, she added to herself.

"It would seem so," Dentus agreed. "He spent the rest of the day backpedaling from that; it was something to see. I have to think that's going to cost him some support from the parents of Hogwarts students. And I'd like to keep the pressure on, which is the reason I'm here." All of the teachers except Hagrid were in the staff room; it was a day off, but Hermione had requested their presence. "In view of what happened today, I think it would be very effective if as many Hogwarts professors as possible stated that they had

no intention of staying on if Roger Trent became Minister. He's clearly demonstrated that he intends to exert total—"

"You need not give us a sales pitch, Professor," cut in Snape. "I, for one, will cheerfully sign any such document as you describe."

"Cheerfully?" repeated John, eyebrows raised.

Snape raised an eyebrow in response. "Yes, cheerfully. I could even smile, if you like."

John made a gesture humorously suggesting that he was overwhelmed. "Well, let's not get crazy..."

"Speak for yourself, I want to see it," put in Flitwick.

"Yes, me too," agreed Sprout.

"Well, the people have spoken," allowed John. "I suppose it's about as rare as..."

"Harry appearing naked?" suggested Snape; everyone laughed.

"Oh, I wish he were here," said Sprout, chuckling. "It's much better making fun of him when he's around than when he's not. Anyway, I'll certainly sign it, Archibald. It's quite clear what kind of place Trent intends to make Hogwarts, and it's no place I'd want to be." The other teachers nodded their assent.

"Good, thank you," said Dentus. "And even if he does become Minister, which I admit is more likely than not, it doesn't have to be that way. By the time we get done with him, he'll be swearing to leave Hogwarts alone. We can always agree to stay provided he continues to leave us

alone, then once Harry gets back, that's that. After having his life saved by Harry, Trent will be in no position to push Harry around."

Hermione exchanged a significant glance with Snape; again, they couldn't reveal what they knew, that Hogwarts could be protected even if Trent were adversarial. It was better if it didn't come to that, of course. Hermione also noted with interest that this had been the first time that Snape had made a joke that had gotten this much of a laugh; his jokes were usually more cutting. Even though this joke had been at Harry's expense, it was obviously meant in an affectionate way, which the other teachers had understood. Snape had also more or less invited humor at his own expense, which was even more unusual. It's good to see him doing that sort of thing, she mused.

Over the next few days, events proceeded as had become usual. About three people a day were killed, more often than not important people. Trent had challenged Arthur to agree to re-institute the ARA, but with one new feature: this law would restrict 'any instantaneous movement from place to place by means other than a fireplace or a Portkey set up with Ministry authorization.' It didn't take Dentus long to realize that this would prohibit not only Apparation, but also movement with the assistance of a phoenix. Clearly Trent wanted Arthur to oppose it, after which he would claim Arthur was weak on security. Arthur came back fighting, supporting the old ARA and accusing Trent of an anti-phoenix bias. The next day, Trent was very angry to find that Kingsley had told the Prophet that it actually harmed security to restrict people from moving by phoenix; to Trent's accusation of bias, Kingsley responded that he was simply giving a professional opinion on a matter of security. Kingsley also said that he wasn't sure how much good the ARA would do, and the issue died out there.

Such skirmishes had become commonplace in the campaign. Arthur focused on them when he thought they made a larger point that he thought should be made, but for the most part he stuck with his original plan: to focus on who he was, on the fact that he would do the right thing. He would support the Aurors, not try to control them. He would support an independent Hogwarts, which had demonstrated recently that it could deal with adversity quite well. He would pay more attention to keeping the wizarding world hidden from the Muggle world (this wasn't a popular issue, he quickly discovered, but he tried to educate people about it). He wouldn't ostracize people for their political views, which reports indicated Trent was trying to do in the Ministry. His message seemed to be slowly starting to catch hold; four days after the campaign had begun, the goblins' over/under on Arthur's final tally had increased from twenty-five to thirty-five.

Trent ran the campaign Dentus had expected him to, a fairly typical campaign: tell people what they want to hear, and inspire fear in them to make them afraid of voting for the other candidate. Almost no one in the Ministry supported Weasley, said Trent, so how could he be an effective Minister? He was naïve, he didn't know how to get things done, he would be consumed by the bureaucracy. He would abdicate responsibility for security to the Aurors, who, let's face it, haven't gotten the job done yet. They need strong leadership. He advocated higher fees for economic activity by goblins, as almost every Ministerial candidate did, only to drop the idea upon taking office, as the goblins had other economic weapons at their disposal to counter such a threat. They knew how wizarding politics worked, however, and took such comments in stride. Arthur refused to say the same thing, but told those to whom he spoke that Trent's statement was an empty pledge. Still, it was popular, which was why politicians did it.

On Wednesday, the sixth day of the two-week campaign, the Prophet released its first poll of political attitudes and support for the candidates. When asked who they planned to Choose, 64% said Trent, 26% said Arthur, and the remaining ten percent didn't know. Dentus was a little discouraged with the result; he'd hoped for better, but knew that it wasn't out of line with what was to be realistically expected.

The poll yielded some interesting results, some of which suggested a great divide in wizarding society. Among Ministry employees, Trent was preferred by 84% to 15%; Dentus was surprised it wasn't worse. Arthur was supported by 36% of women, but only 16% of men. Most startlingly, in a separate poll of energy-of-love users, who were barely included in the main poll due to their low numbers, Arthur was favored by an astonishing 98% to 0%, with 2% undecided. Another separate poll was taken of Hogwarts students (there was no minimum Choosing age; since children normally had little magical strength, it had been deemed harmless to allow them to participate, and a good way to encourage civic-mindedness), where Arthur received 76% support, to Trent's 6% and 18% undecided. This wasn't deemed greatly significant, since Hogwarts students accounted for less than 1% of the population, but Trent seized upon the numbers as evidence that Hermione had been politicizing Hogwarts and turning it against him. Arthur knew, however, from Dentus's Hogwarts contacts, that it was in fact Amelia Bones who was substantially responsible; she had been turning her classes into political seminars. The Prophet ran a separate article on the significance of Arthur's energy-of-love support, speculating that Arthur could be Chosen on the basis of as little as 45% public support, with the extra magical power of the energy-of-love users compensating for the shortfall.

Other poll information showed the favorability/unfavorability/no opinion ratings on individuals. They included: Roger Trent, 63/33/4; Arthur Weasley, 52/22/26; Harry Potter, 99/1/0; and Hermione Granger, 69/25/6. Dentus took some comfort in that twenty-six percent still hadn't formed an opinion of Arthur; that meant those people said they supported Trent mainly because they didn't know his opposition. The Choosing was novel enough that it was getting a lot of attention in the wizarding world, but clearly not everyone was fully engaged. If only we had more time, thought Dentus. He had urged Arthur to take some extra time at the beginning by using his right as an undersecretary to challenge Trent for a few weeks before demanding a Choosing, but Arthur had insisted on doing it right away; he truly didn't want the wizarding world leaderless for any longer than necessary. Trent said that out of political opportunism; Arthur actually meant it.

Having been transported there by Red, Pansy walked through the halls of Hogwarts, ignoring the surprised glances of the students she passed. She supposed most of them wouldn't know who she was were it not for the phoenix on her shoulder. Red had let her know where Hedrick and Helen were, and she soon found them doing their patrols.

She greeted them, her expression solemn. "A few hours ago, some of the others started waking up. David, Sylvia, Augustina, and Matthew. The others are still out, but this makes it look a lot more like they'll be back, probably soon."

Hedrick and Helen gripped each other's hands, obviously vastly relieved. "That's great," said Hedrick. "Can we see them?"

Pansy nodded. "That's what I'm here to talk to you about. All eight of them are in one room, and it didn't take long for

them to notice that Derek wasn't around. I had to tell them. As we expected, they took it very badly. You can see them, but I wanted to warn you about the state they'll be in. They know now what the artifact did, they know it wasn't really their fault, but they're going to feel this way anyway. It's probably unavoidable, at least for a while."

They nodded their understanding. "We'll do our best," said Helen.

"Just be there for them," said Pansy. "There's not much else you can do."

A few minutes later, Hedrick and Helen walked into the St. Mungo's ward that contained their friends. The four looked at them uncertainly, obviously ashamed of how they had treated Hedrick and Helen while under the influence of the artifact. Helen walked to Matthew, the nearest one, and pulled him into a hug; Hedrick did the same with Augustina. Matthew and Augustina were both soon crying. "I'm sorry," breathed Augustina into Hedrick's shoulder. "We all are."

"It wasn't your fault," he said, glancing over her shoulder at David and Sylvia. "You were under the influence of something."

"It didn't feel like we were under the influence of anything," sniffled Augustina. "It felt like we knew exactly what we were doing."

"I think that's what it feels like when you're under the influence of something," said Helen, stroking the back of a still-sobbing Matthew. "But you were. Its whole point is to make you do what you did. You can't blame yourselves for that." She got no response, but she hadn't expected any. Pansy had assured her that they would get psychological

help, for which she was glad. I wouldn't want to be them right now, she thought.

As Harry had, Luna greatly enjoyed the time she spent as a phoenix. Unlike Harry, she had no restrictions or reasons why she couldn't or shouldn't do it. She had no partner to worry about abandoning, and while she needed to spend most of her time with Arthur, she could at the end of the day become a phoenix for as long as she wanted, then go back in time to just after she took a phoenix form, as she had done before. She wondered why Harry hadn't done that; she decided that it just must not have occurred to him.

She decided to visit, as a phoenix, places she was familiar with as a human to see how different they looked. She flew around Diagon Alley, landing every now and then just to survey the scene. Just for fun, she flew into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, where Fred and George looked on, impressed, and communicated in the only way they knew how.

"Look, a phoenix! Is it Harry?"

"Harry, if that's you, whistle for us."

"Phoenixes can't whistle, you idiot."

"It couldn't be Harry anyway, he's still too young. What's your name?"

"They can't talk, either. Come here, and if you want to join me, land on my right shoulder."

Unable to resist, Luna flew over and landed on Fred's left shoulder. George cracked up as Fred looked stunned. "He wants to join! He just got the shoulder wrong!"

"You should join *me*," said George. "If you want to join me, land on my left shoulder." Obliging, Luna left Fred, and settled on George's right shoulder.

They exchanged another startled look. "Maybe he wants to bond with both of us!"

"Then why did he choose the wrong shoulder each time?"

"Maybe he's dyslexic!"

"Are you dyslexic?" George asked Luna. She slowly shook her head from side to side, then took off and disappeared.

Both were stunned. "I didn't know phoenixes understood English so well," said Fred.

"Must already be bonded, and just flying around for fun," suggested George.

"Maybe Harry put him up to it, just to mess us up."

"Yeah, that must be it." A pause. "Wish we'd gotten a picture, though."

She flew on to Hogsmeade, stopping in several places there as well, including a few homes; it fascinated her to see the responses a phoenix got, including some none-too-subtle hopes of being joined. She went on to Hogwarts, where Roger Trent was making a campaign stop, more for the purposes of a photo-op than to truly get support that he had to know wasn't likely forthcoming. She came close enough to get a phoenix-look at him, and she didn't like what she saw, though she had known she wouldn't. She could see that he liked to see himself as good and fundamentally well-intentioned, but there was a very hard edge to him. He could be a kind and good person, the kind who would help a friend

in need or a relative with a problem. But when it came to politics, he was able to shut off his emotions and essentially switch personas. As a politician, what the politics and the law permitted were the only restrictions on his behavior. Apparently, he had decided long ago that it was the only way to get ahead.

She scouted around Hogwarts more, and thought it looked very good through the eyes of a phoenix. The school had been teaching the energy of love for five years, and it showed up strongly to her senses. The students were happier than she remembered them being, and she wondered how her experience would have been different if she and her class had been taught the energy of love from the first year. She popped in on Hagrid to say hello and sing for a minute, and let him admire her a little before moving on. Her phoenix-read on him was that there were only a few small things keeping him from becoming a suitable phoenix companion, such as a lack of self-confidence, a slightly volatile temper, and an inhibition from expressing the affection he felt for people. She then went to the greenhouse to snack on a few lutas. They tasted great as a phoenix, but she imagined she wouldn't be able to eat them at all as a human.

Then it was off to the Ministry. She visited a few large offices so she wouldn't only be seen in one place, in case that raised any suspicion, but what she was particularly interested in seeing was the Muggle Liaison office. She perched on a tall cabinet at the side of the office and looked around. The whole office was soon staring at her, which was a typical reaction; in some places she'd gone, the people had never seen a phoenix in person before.

Dudley was much like she had expected: generally friendly and honorable, but aggressive, with a temper that he

usually kept under control. These days he had a stronger seriousness of purpose than usual; she could tell that he was proud of his role in helping save the wizarding world from exposure at Hogwarts. Right then, he was frustrated that he couldn't do anything more than he was doing.

As for Colin... as a human, she had liked him and thought he was a nice person. On the quiet and unassuming side, but she didn't mind men like that. She'd been in the same year as him in school, where of course he'd been most well-known for being an admirer of Harry's, and later for taking over for Lee Jordan as Quidditch announcer. She hadn't gotten to know him well; they had both been reserved, in their own ways. But now, seeing him for the first time as a phoenix, she found she was greatly attracted to him. He'd been able to use the energy of love since sixth year, but it was more than that. He had a gentleness that most men didn't have. He couldn't have been an Auror, but she could see he was the type that when in love, would be in it without reservation or hesitation. He also seemed very appropriate for companioning by a phoenix. She sent a message to the phoenix community: why isn't this one taken?"

Every phoenix who listened to her message—any could hear, and would listen if not otherwise occupied—also received her impression of him. The answer came back: there are more appropriate humans than usual recently, especially in your geographical area. This particular one did not come to our notice. If you would like to companion him, by all means do so. If not, he will be kept in mind for the future. Luna had discovered in exchanging impressions with the phoenixes that sometimes an already-bonded phoenix, knowing its current companion had only five or ten years remaining, 'claimed' another human as its future companion by bonding very lightly, but enough to let another phoenix know that this one was 'taken.' Luna had been informed that

Neville had already been 'taken' in such a way, and would probably be companioned within two or three years.

Luna knew that many women valued the 'mystery' of getting to know a man, slowly finding out about him, his layers, what made him tick. It occurred to her that a phoenix-look rendered all that moot; she had seen what there was to see of Colin, and she knew how she felt. She wanted to be with him. What do I do now, she wondered. Do I bond with him as a phoenix, or ask him on a date? Or both? She'd never been sure about how to deal with men romantically as a human, and it didn't seem any easier when one was a phoenix. After a few minutes' thought, she had an idea. In a way, it didn't seem fair, but being both a human and a phoenix presented unusual problems.

She continued to sit on the cabinet, not moving, and eventually people stopped looking at her and got back to their jobs. Twenty minutes later, Dudley got up and left the office; Luna assumed it was to go to the restroom. She looked at the clock, which read four thirty-five. A few seconds after Dudley left, the human Luna entered the office as the phoenix Luna watched.

"Hi, Colin, how's it going?"

"Hi, Luna. Same as usual. You going to hang out for a while?" The phoenix saw that Colin was happy to see her, and had missed her being around almost all the time as she had been before Arthur challenged Trent.

"No, I actually need to get back and rejoin Arthur. But I wanted to ask what you were doing tonight."

He thought, obviously thinking it an innocent question. "Nothing, really. Why?"

"I'd like to go out to dinner with you."

He looked blank. "Dinner? You mean, with Dudley, and—"

"No, just with you." He was still confused; better make it very clear, she thought. "I want to go on a date with you, for dinner."

His eyes went wide; he appeared never to have considered the question before. "W-Why?" he stammered, and even the human Luna could see that he was mentally kicking himself for having said it.

She smiled. "I like you, Colin. Do I need another reason?"

"No, no, of course not," he said, flustered. "I'm sorry, I just... this doesn't happen every day. But yes, I would really like to go to dinner with you." He grinned, embarrassed.

"Good. You're off at five-thirty, like usual? I'll come by then, and we can figure out where to go. I'll see you then." She smiled again and left; the smile was partly because this version of Luna had already watched the conversation as a phoenix, and knew that Colin was delighted to be asked out by her.

The phoenix watching remained for a few minutes, then took off and teleported to Luna's bedroom at her home. She became a human, went back through time to four thirty-four, then teleported to an empty office at the Ministry near the Muggle Liaison office, where she would pass Dudley in the hall on her way to see Colin. Next time, she thought, I should do it where I'm the human first and the phoenix second, so I won't know what happens when I do it as a human. I'm sure it's more fun that way.

She came back at almost exactly five-thirty, to find Colin waiting outside the office. "I didn't want Dudley making another half-dozen jokes," he explained. "He's been making them nonstop since I told him."

"I'm sure he thinks it's nice, he's just embarrassed," suggested Luna. "Let's Apparate to Diagon Alley, you can decide where we go from there."

They did, and started walking towards the wall that led to Muggle London. "I'd rather go to Muggle places these days, since the dragon took out half of the Diagon Alley restaurants, the ones that are left are all pretty busy."

She agreed. "So, did anything happen today?"

Colin seemed happy to be on the comfortable conversational ground of work. "No, not really. The main news is still the situation in the Middle East. America is pouring even more troops into Iraq, canceling the soldiers' vacations and putting in troops that were supposed to be rotated out. They're only supposed to be in combat situations for so long," he explained. "They're also moving units from other parts of the country to be closer to the Iranian front, which is expected to create some opportunities for the Iraqis who are fighting the Americans. Anyway, it's still what the Muggles call a powder keg, which means something that could explode at any minute. And we're still no nearer to persuading anyone that wizards had anything to do with it. How about you? How's Arthur doing?"

She shrugged lightly. "I guess you saw the poll numbers today."

"It was all anyone was talking about in the morning. The funniest thing was the one about Harry. Ninety-nine percent, that's incredible. People were making jokes, like, 'All right,

where's the guy who doesn't like Harry? Don't worry, Creevey, we know it's not you."

Luna laughed. "You're never going to live that down, are you?"

He shrugged as they walked out of Diagon Alley. "It's a little easier to deal with, considering that Harry is universally revered. Well, almost universally. I always just say, like you've heard, that I was just ahead of my time. It's just a joke, and we all have something people make jokes about us with. If mine wasn't this, it would be something else."

"That's true, I know that firsthand," she agreed. "Of course, there were a half-dozen things like that with me. Anyway, the polls showed what we more or less already knew; that if Arthur's catching on, it's not enough, not fast enough. He had very little name recognition before this, and even now, a quarter of the people have no opinion about him. Two-thirds have a favorable opinion of Trent, so we're not going to win unless we can get people to have an even more favorable opinion about Arthur. In a little over a week, that's going to be tough."

"In a Muggle campaign, Arthur's only chance would be to throw mud at Trent, try to get people to see him as the less bad alternative," said Colin.

"Archibald has said that," said Luna. "He says it would work for a wizard campaign as well. But he was only speaking theoretically, with Arthur not around, because he knows that Arthur won't do that. So, they're just going to keep doing what they've been doing. So, where are we going?"

"There's a Chinese one a few minutes away that's pretty good. One good thing about working with Dudley, I get

exposed to lots of good Muggle restaurants. You know Dudley, he never eats at home."

"Yes, I remember him saying that his refrigerator contains only beer and soft drinks," agreed Luna.

"He could always eat with his parents, but then, as he put it, 'Having to talk to them is a high price to pay for a meal.'"

"I thought he liked his parents okay."

"They get along, and his parents couldn't be prouder of what they think he does, but he says his parents always go on and on about the same subjects, and it gets boring. He does it once every couple weeks to be nice, and because his mother would bother him if he didn't, but—"

Colin stopped talking as his cell phone rang; he had explained to Luna a week ago that he and Dennis had gotten them in deference to their Muggle parents, who had a difficult time getting a hold of them in the wizarding world. "This has to be my family, since no one except them and Dudley knows this number." He opened the phone. "Yeah." He paused, listening, then exhaled, very visible relief on his face. "Oh, thank God. That's fantastic. Yeah, okay, I'll be right there. Thanks."

He stopped walking and turned to Luna. "That was Dennis. Andrea's awake, she's going to be all right."

"That's wonderful," she said sincerely; even though she'd spent the past week mostly with Arthur, she knew Colin was very worried about his sister.

"Yes, it is. Look, I'm really sorry, but I should—"

"Of course you should," she cut him off so he wouldn't have to explain himself. "Do you mind if I come along?"

He seemed surprised, but nodded. "Yeah, sure. It's not going to be any fun, though. She's going to feel bad about what happened."

"That's okay. Are we Apparating to the St. Mungo's lobby?"

"Yeah. Let's find a place to Disapparate." They ducked into an empty staircase in a nearby building, and Disapparated.

A minute later they walked into the room with eight beds; Hedrick and Helen were there, as was Dennis. Luna stayed close to the door, not wanting to get in the way. Colin walked over to Andrea looking like he intended to hug her, but her body language suggested that she didn't want him to. He settled for putting an arm around her and pulling her to him. "We're so glad you're all right. When are you coming home? Or going back to Hogwarts?"

"Hogwarts," she answered quietly.

Augustina answered his other question. "They're making all of us stay one more night. I'd rather be back at Hogwarts, we all would, but you know how Healers are. Pansy admits we could go back, but..."

Sylvia stepped closer to Andrea's bed. "Andrea... we're sorry we got you into this."

She shook her head. "You didn't get me into this, that damn thing did. I'm so sorry about Derek..."

Augustina nodded. "We all are. We know it really isn't our fault, ten different people have been in here today telling us

that, you were awake for a few of them. They just said it's going to take some time to deal with."

In the silence, Luna closed her eyes and focused on reaching up to the spiritual realm. She felt around for Derek, even though she didn't know him; she sent images of the other Slytherins. If he was there and watching, maybe he would respond. It took a few more minutes, but finally she got something. Trying to keep her focus, she asked, "Does Derek have anything to do with the number nine?"

"Yes, his name was ninth in alphabetical order of our group, and he sometimes referred to himself that way, something to do with the number nine," said Helen. She realized what Luna was doing, and her face lit up. "Oh, wow, Pansy said you could do that. Are you talking to him now?"

"I'm pretty sure it's him," said Luna. "He seems to be saying that 'nine' also refers to something else, maybe the size of something, like a... oh, dear. Hmmm, how do I put this..."

Helen giggled, as did a few others. "He made that joke once, and I made him promise never to do it again," she explained, now smiling.

"He could be kind of crude," added Sylvia. "That must really be him. Tell him we miss him, and that we're sorry."

"He can hear you, and he says he's sorry too," reported Luna. "He says you shouldn't feel bad, that it was something that someone did to all of you, and that it's nice where he is. But there's something he wants you to do."

"What?" asked Helen anxiously. "Whatever it is, we'll do it."

"He says it won't make any sense to me, so he'll have to explain carefully," said Luna. "I'm getting an image of a Ring

of Reduction. Then... people moving around, like action, something's happening. I get the feeling of a story. Now..." Luna paused in puzzlement. "I feel like he's kissing some woman, she has dark hair, kind of ethnic-looking. Does that make any sense?"

Stunned expressions, and a few tears, came to the faces of most of the Slytherins. Helen's mouth dropped open. "Does he mean that he wants us to write a Ring of Reduction adventure where he saves the beautiful foreign exchange student?"

"He says yes, exactly. I'm getting a closer image of the kiss, somehow the kiss is important, like he doesn't want you to forget it."

Tears were spilling down Helen's face. "We won't, we promise. It'll be a great kiss."

"He says he's looking forward to seeing it. And that he loves all of you, and that he's not really gone, since he'll be around. He wants you to remember that." Her connection to him broken, Luna opened her eyes again, to see all of the Slytherins crying, or near tears. To her surprise, she realized that a few tears had come to her eyes as well; she had been too occupied to notice. Colin stood next to her and put his arm around her shoulders; she put one around his waist. When he got that call, I didn't know why I suggested that I go with him, she thought. Now, I know.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 13: Dudley and Colin find a way to further their investigation; Arthur gets news, unrelated to the campaign, that changes his life significantly.

From Chapter 13: "We have to do this, Kingsley," said Arthur. "It may not do any good, but if it works, it could save thousands of lives."

Kingsley thought about it. "All right. But I'm not telling any other Aurors about this. If we get found out, it's just going to be me."

13. Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Drake had been content to let things simmer for a while on all three fronts. He was devoting more time to his efforts in wizarding America. Muggle America appeared to be about to go to war on false pretenses, and wizarding England was undergoing a fascinating struggle. Drake had expected a hard-liner to replace Bright; the people would put their leadership in the hands of someone who appeared tough and vowed to protect them; they wouldn't be fussy about how he did it. But with Arthur Weasley's challenge to Trent, it was as if the forces of moderation were making a desperate effort to be heard. If the information in the Prophet was any indication, however, those voices were not being heard by enough people. This was what Drake had expected, of course; Weasley would lose, and Trent would start eroding the freedoms of wizarding society, using his power to divide people and accelerate the creation of fear. History told Drake this was what almost always happened in the face of a society-wide threat.

Joe was killing six to ten wizards a day in England and America, and was thoroughly addicted to the ring. This would not be a problem until he needed Joe to start killing less for some reason, but he would worry about that later. He had in mind for Joe an unusually public mission in England. As a test, he had hit Joe with a Stunning spell; Joe had barely felt it. For the few seconds necessary, Joe would be nearly impervious to any magic. Taking people out by stealth was one thing, but doing it in a public place would create even more fear. Assured that it would be very difficult to stop him even if Aurors were present, Joe agreed to the mission. He

would be able to kill three, maybe four, before escaping. He reluctantly agreed to Trent's directive that the mission was to be aborted if Aurors happened to be present; there was no point in taking unnecessary chances.

"So, Andrea's back at Hogwarts today?" asked Luna.

Colin and Luna had stayed for another hour in the hospital room the night before. The Slytherins thanked Luna for delivering Derek's messages, and asked her questions about the spiritual realm and the disposition of the recently deceased. A few asked her to contact deceased relatives, and she tried, but she explained that most spirits declined to say anything unless they had something in particular to say. Dennis had left with them, and with Colin and Luna's encouragement, joined them for dinner at the Chinese restaurant. They had spent most of the dinner talking about Colin's family, which was very interesting to Luna.

"Yes, they were back in time for their morning classes, apparently," said Colin. He, she, and Dudley were walking through Diagon Alley, going to Florean Fortescue's for lunch. Arthur was having lunch with a group of important housewives; the event was being covered by another Prophet reporter, so Luna felt free to have lunch with Colin and Dudley. "I'm glad. I hope she can start to put this behind her."

"Me, too. No news in the Muggle world?"

Colin and Dudley shook their heads. "Nothing's changed. How about Arthur?"

"Trent gave him a particularly nasty challenge today," said Luna. "You know that there's been talk of a debate between the two of them, and their camps have been quietly negotiating the terms. Well, today, it was not so quiet. Trent

publicly challenged Arthur to a debate in which both of them would first drink Veritaserum."

Colin and Dudley exchanged raised eyebrows. "I'd think that would be riskier for Trent than for Arthur," suggested Dudley. "Arthur doesn't tend to lie; there's no reason he shouldn't do it."

"It is a little risky for Trent," agreed Luna, "but there's one problem. Arthur won't do it. Not because he's afraid that he'll say something damaging under the influence of Veritaserum, but because he thinks it's a very bad precedent. He feels—and this makes sense to me—that if people are forced or pressured into taking Veritaserum to prove that what they're saying is true, then it becomes like coercion. Two important people, one of whom will be the Minister, taking Veritaserum in a public forum would send a very dangerous message, Arthur feels."

"The message being, 'you have to take Veritaserum if you want us to believe that what you're saying is true,'" supplied Colin. "That could lead to it being used in other situations, and being generally accepted. Its use could become widespread."

Luna nodded. "Yes, exactly. By accepting Trent's challenge, he would be implicitly saying that it's all right to use Veritaserum to check the truth of what someone's saying. The problem is, Arthur saying no will be a huge win for Trent. He can portray it as Arthur having something to hide, while he, Trent, is willing to make sure people hear the unvarnished truth. Arthur can explain his side, and anyone who listens carefully will understand, but for people who only read the headlines—and I've discovered there are quite a few of them—it'll make Arthur look bad. There's just no way out of this for Arthur. He has to say no, explain it as best

he can, and take the consequences. Of course, most politicians would say yes, caring more about the politics than the precedent. But, we know Arthur."

Colin and Dudley nodded sadly as they sat at the only open table at a crowded Florean Fortescue's. "I'm surprised Trent had the nerve to try it," said Colin. "I mean, what if Arthur had said yes? The debate being that way would have been bad for Trent."

"He probably would have found some way to squirm out of it," said Dudley. "But I'm sure he had a very good idea of what Arthur would do. The problem with having principles is that it makes you predictable."

"Well, if you follow the politics, that's predictable too," pointed out Colin. "It's just less politically dangerous." Dudley nodded his acknowledgment.

"So, Arthur spent most of the morning responding to that, talking about how this means that Trent would have us live in a society where we had no privacy, we were compelled to testify against ourselves, and so forth," said Luna. "He painted a pretty bleak picture. Trent, of course, responds that Arthur is being hysterical in his efforts to avoid telling the truth, there's no need to worry about a precedent, and so forth. All lies, ironically, but the kind of lie you can get away with, since it can't be proved false."

Colin sighed. "And it requires a certain amount of thought to realize that it's a lie. It's amazing, how... sleazy this guy is. Bright wouldn't have done half of this stuff. Then again, Bright was a really good politician, so he didn't have to."

"Everyone I talk to says Bright had a way with people," said Luna. "A natural charm, a way of getting you to like him, that neither of these two have. Arthur's a good person, but

he can come off a little stiff at first. He's not a natural politician. Trent, on the other hand, makes up for his lack of personality with his institutional power. He could probably win without campaigning at all; others would do it for him. But anyway, this is almost certainly going to cost Arthur. It isn't right."

"That's politics," said Colin resignedly. "There's a whole lot about it that isn't right. So, do we know what we want to order?"

Dudley had been glancing at a man who had been approaching the open-air tables. He looked very nondescript, but was looking around very carefully. Dudley wondered if he might be concerned about an attack, but there had been no attacks in public places, and the look in the man's eyes was more hard than concerned. Dudley was about to gesture to Colin when the man, standing five feet away now with Colin, Dudley, and Luna to his right, pointed his wand at people at other tables. He didn't speak, but Dudley knew what a Killing Curse looked like, and they were coming from the man's wand. A few people screamed.

Colin hurriedly reached for his wand, and instantly put up a Killing Curse shield around one of the patrons just in time; a bolt struck another. The attacker looked to his left for another target. Dudley rose from his chair instantly, throwing it aside, and covered the distance to the man with all the quickness his old boxing reflexes allowed. Just as the man turned to look at Dudley, Dudley's fist was in his face. The impact made a loud cracking noise, and the man started to fall. Dudley grabbed the man's arms, causing him to drop his wand, and in one movement roughly pulled the man's arms behind his back and pushed him to the ground facefirst. "Somebody get Aurors!" he shouted.

Colin, standing by now, cast the spell that would wrap ropes around the man, and Dudley moved his hands just in time not to be caught in the ropes. The man was bound with his hands behind his back.

Tonks and Jack Temble came running up. "What happened?" asked Tonks.

"This is probably the guy, or one of them, who's been doing a lot of the killing," said Colin. "He just opened up with Killing Curses. Dudley managed to get to him, laid him out with one punch."

"His nose is broken," added Dudley, as the man's moans emphasized the point. "Not the worst of his problems right now, I'd guess." The area suddenly became more crowded, as more Aurors and Healers started Apparating in.

"No, I wouldn't think so," agreed Jack, hauling the man to his feet. With his free hand, he reached out to shake Dudley's. "Thank you, Dudley. You saved lives, not only those here, but very likely future ones as well." Dudley nodded as the patrons broke into applause. Slightly embarrassed, but enjoying the attention, Dudley smiled and nodded.

"We're going to need everyone to move, please," said an Auror; people started getting up and moving aside. "Where are we going to eat now?" Dudley asked Colin and Luna.

"Hello, young man, I am Florean Fortescue," said an older man who had quickly walked up to the three, offering Dudley his hand. "You are Dudley Dursley, Harry Potter's cousin?" Dudley nodded; Fortescue smiled. "My, my, some things do run in families. I'm sorry that lunch seems to be shut down, but the manager of the Golden Dragon is a friend of mine. If you'll just wait here, I will see to it that you three

get their next available table, and I will take care of the tab. Excuse me." He briskly walked off.

Colin smiled at Dudley. "The man of the hour. Or, maybe, the Muggle of the hour."

Dudley chuckled. "I think you wizards forget that you can hit people, too. He probably forgot."

"If this goes the way I think it'll go, it means your job is safe even if Trent wins," said Colin. After a slight pause, he added, "Of course, that might just mean they fire me instead of you."

"Nah, I'll make sure that doesn't happen either," smiled Dudley.

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"No problem."

In the middle of their meal at the Golden Dragon, Luna excused herself to go to the restroom, stopped time while there, and teleported to her home, finding her father in the living room. She extended the time-field around him. "I guess you heard."

"Word travels fast. I'm just glad you're all right."

She chuckled humorlessly. "I'm pretty much unkillable right now. Even if they fired a Killing Curse at me from behind, I'd see it coming. You don't have to worry about that."

Her father saw the sadness in her eyes. "You feel bad for not helping."

"Colin saved one person, one died, and one got a glancing blow; she was wounded, but she'll be all right. What really bothers me, Daddy, is that I could have saved the man who was killed, just with my usual abilities! And I didn't!"

"Why didn't you?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I just... froze, I guess. It all happened really fast, there was hardly time to think; it didn't even occur to me to stop time. Before, my reflex would have been the same as Colin's was, to grab my wand and try to save someone. Now, it was to decide whether I should help or not, and before I could decide anything, it was too late. A man is dead who I could have saved."

He moved closer to her and took her in his arms. "I'm sorry, honey. But you really shouldn't blame yourself. This is a huge burden, and you're not used to it yet. This kind of thing is... part of your education, I guess. It's very new, your reflexes haven't adapted to it yet. They will."

"A very expensive education," she muttered.

"Some things can't be learned any other way," he said. "You didn't make a conscious decision not to help. If it had happened that you'd been looking the other way, and didn't happen to see until it was too late, you wouldn't blame yourself. I really think this is like that. You just weren't able to respond like you would have wanted to, and we can't blame ourselves for not doing things we couldn't do."

"We do anyway," she said, understanding his point. "I guess it goes with being human. I was with those seven Slytherin seventh years yesterday. I peeked into their minds, and they know they had no control over what happened, but they felt bad anyway. It just takes time, I suppose. Mine just feels different somehow."

"I guess because you have so much extra power to help that you don't use," suggested her father. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

She gripped him tightly. "How can I be who I am, who I want to be, if my impulse to help people isn't there, if I have to shut it down?" she asked, anguished.

"Not shut down," he whispered. "Just altered. You'll find the right place. I know you." She very badly hoped that he was right.

Two hours later, Kingsley walked to the spot at the Atrium from which one spoke to the press. Seeing Dudley in the crowd, which was at least as large as it had been when Arthur announced his challenge to Trent, he motioned him forward. "It seems only fair that you should get your picture in the paper," he whispered to Dudley, who he had stand behind him and to his right. "Your parents will be so proud."

Dudley gave him a wry grin. "Only if you take Polyjuice Potion and make yourself look like the Muggle Prime Minister."

"I'll work on it." Kingsley turned to the press and the crowd, speaking loudly. "Good afternoon. I am pleased to announce that we have in custody the man who has committed most every attack on British wizards, and American wizards for that matter, since Lucius Malfoy died. His interrogation is continuing, but we have already acquired quite a bit of information, much of which I cannot reveal for security reasons.

"I can say that the reason we have this man is standing right behind me. There was an attack at Florean Fortescue's in Diagon Alley. Dudley Dursley, who some of you may know is a Muggle, is Harry Potter's cousin, and works in the Muggle Liaison office at the Ministry, was eating lunch there with

two friends. He caught the attacker by surprise and was able to physically subdue him, with a very strong punch that broke the attacker's nose.

"We have discovered that the attacker has killed about one hundred wizards over the past two weeks. He is from Kenya, Africa, and is a mercenary, a killer for hire. He was hired by the man we are sure is the instigator of the strife of the past three weeks. He is also a werewolf, and we have discovered that over the past few days he has bitten four people in England. The purpose, he was told, was to contribute to the political chaos in this country. There is a full moon tomorrow night, and the notion was that those he bit would unexpectedly become werewolves and attack others, killing some. This would cause a very negative climate in England towards werewolves, and prompt political leaders to issue new restrictions." Kingsley had decided to lie; Snape, who was still going over the man's memories, strongly suspected it was the case, but did not know it for a fact. Kingsley decided to present it as fact anyway, as his small way of affecting the outcome of the Choosing. Smart people would understand very well that this attack was designed to create fear, which would help Trent. "I'll take your questions now."

"Did you get any information which leads you closer to the source of these attacks?"

Unfortunately, no, he thought. "I can't answer that question, for security reasons."

"How is the interrogation being conducted? Is Legilimency being used?"

Of course, you idiot. "I can't answer that question, for security reasons."

"A question for Mr. Dursley, if I could. Mr. Dursley, it's been reported that you bullied your cousin, Harry Potter, as a child. Is that true?"

I knew it, thought Dudley. "I can't answer that question, for security reasons." Most of those watching, and Kingsley, laughed. "Well, it worked for you," said Dudley to Kingsley. "Colin, my five Galleons, please. Thank you," he said as he caught a small package tossed to him by Colin. Addressing the reporters, he added, "That's my co-worker, Colin Creevey. I bet him five Galleons that that would be the first question you would ask me. It's the first thing almost every wizard says to me. So, with any luck, this will be the last time. Yes, I gave him a hard time when we were kids. No, I'm not proud of it, but I think most of us do stuff as kids we later wish we hadn't done. Most just don't happen to be the cousin of someone extremely famous, and so get asked about it a hundred times. But that's in the past, and Harry and I are friends now. If anyone wants to ask about what happened today, I'll be happy to answer."

He answered a few routine questions about what had happened, and when it looked like there were no more, he decided to take advantage of an opportunity. "Look, while I have you here, I want to mention that you really ought to be paying more attention to the Muggle world. Colin and I have serious reason to think that this guy's boss, whoever hired him, also did a chemical attack against American Muggles that left over five hundred dead and could start a Muggle war. Kingsley, did you get anything from him that could connect his boss to that?"

There was just a hint of a smile on Kingsley's face. "I can't answer that question—"

"For security reasons," Dudley finished along with him, to scattered laughter. "Sorry, I forgot. But I am serious about this, and I think the Prophet should devote some space every day to Muggle events. Okay, I'm finished. Kingsley?"

Dudley watched Kingsley refuse to answer a few more questions, then get a few he could actually answer. As the questioning wound down, Dudley saw Roger Trent edging closer. "What's he doing here?" he asked Colin, standing a few feet away.

"Probably looking for some way to associate himself with what happened," suggested Colin. "He might even come over to try to shake your hand, get that picture in the paper."

"To hell with that," muttered Dudley. "C'mon, let's go. Apparate me to Harry's place once we're alone." They briskly walked out behind Kingsley, as they saw one of Trent's aides heading for them. They walked into a men's room, and Colin Disapparated them away. "Thanks. That's pretty convenient sometimes."

Dentus, in the living room, looked up with a questioning expression. "I saved him from an involuntary photo-op with Trent," explained Colin.

Dentus nodded knowingly. "He'll kiss you today, slap you tomorrow. A very typical politician in that regard. It may seem especially brazen considering that Dudley works for Arthur, but he'll always get away with what he can."

"Can we use this politically?" wondered Dudley.

"When you talked to the press, did you mention Arthur's name?"

"Sorry. But I did give them a little lecture on how they should pay more attention to Muggle events."

Dentus chuckled. "Arthur will say you had your priorities straight. It's all right, he'll talk about it in his appearances, say he's proud of you, mention that you work for him. But considering that what you did has nothing to do with your job, he won't want to associate himself too closely with it. He'll just say that what you did is the kind of thing we should all do if we have the opportunity. Excuse me, I need to go talk to him."

Dentus Disapparated away, leaving Dudley and Colin alone. "Think we should get back to the office?" suggested Colin.

Dudley frowned thoughtfully. "What I said to those reporters got me thinking, we should be trying harder to clear up the Muggle connection."

"I thought we couldn't do much else. Did you think of something?"

"I have an idea, but we can't be seen going into Hogwarts. I'd really rather use a phoenix. Do you think Fawkes would come if you called him?"

Colin looked doubtful. "I don't think I'm quite close enough to Harry to qualify. You might be, but you're not magical. Well, I'll try. Fawkes?" he said, whirling his wand. Ten seconds later, he shook his head. "Oh, well." He whirled his wand again and jokingly said, "Any phoenix that's not too busy at the moment?"

Colin and Dudley looked at each other, shocked, as a phoenix teleported in and settled on the back of a sofa. "Wow," said Dudley. "I didn't know you could do that."

"I think you can't, I was just joking. Say, I think that's the one that was in the office yesterday. It's hard to tell, though. It's nice to see you anyway, though," he added to the phoenix.

"You talk to them as if they're people?"

"Of course. Some people say they're like people, only better. You may not know, but it was an enormous deal when Harry became a phoenix. It's like... I don't know, rising up a step of evolution or something. But yeah, you always treat phoenixes with respect. You know they can see right through you, right? One glance and they know what kind of person you are."

Dudley glanced at the phoenix, then Colin, nervously. "I suddenly feel like I'm naked or something."

Colin smiled. "Don't worry, they're not judgmental."

Dudley rolled his eyes. "Do they have any negative qualities at all?"

Colin thought. "Nope. Don't think so." He sat on the sofa and looked at the phoenix. "So, does this mean you're willing to take us... where did you want to go again, Dudley?"

"To see Snape."

"Have you ever even met Snape?"

"He doesn't get out much."

"That's one way of putting it," agreed Colin. The phoenix flew into the air; Colin and Dudley grabbed her tail, and the next thing they knew, they were in the Potions dungeon.

"Nice place," said Dudley, looking around.

Colin chuckled. "Probably the least scenic bit of Hogwarts. Wait a minute, you're a Muggle, you're not supposed to be able to see this."

"Muggle-repelling spells don't work on me. Something Harry did a few years back."

"Ah. I wonder where Professor Snape is."

A few seconds after he said the words, the dungeon doors opened, and Snape walked in. Startled, he did a slight double-take upon seeing his visitors. He resumed walking forward towards them. First Ginny, he thought, then Luna, now him; for some reason I have suddenly become very popular with the class of '99. "I would ask 'what is going on,' but my powers of deduction have told me most of what I need to know. Mr. Creevey... you would be Mr. Dursley, I believe... and this?"

"I don't know his name. He—"

Snape shook his head in disapproval. "Professor Hagrid would be most distressed that you cannot tell a female phoenix from a male. But, do continue."

"Sorry, she visited the Ministry yesterday and hung around for a little bit. Just now I said we needed a phoenix, and she showed up. That's all I know."

"Indeed," said Snape, regarding the phoenix with great interest. He stared at her for a few seconds, and nodded to himself. "Yes, I believe I understand the situation perfectly well." Turning to Colin, he asked, "And what can I do for you, Mr. Creevey?"

"It was my idea, actually," said Dudley. "First, I have to explain the situation we're in, about what's going on in America." He took a few minutes to give roughly the same presentation he gave to Kingsley. "So, this is where it stands right now. We're almost sure a wizard did this, but we have no proof. We'd like to investigate, maybe find some proof, but there's only so much we can do. From what I've heard about you, you'd be the perfect person to help, if you were willing. You're experienced at undercover operations, you can do everything an Auror can do, and most importantly of all—"

"You want a Legilimens," supplied Snape; Dudley nodded. "You are aware, I assume, that what you propose would be illegal in multiple ways."

"We know that, Professor," said Colin earnestly. "But this is very important."

"Mr. Creevey, may I have your permission to view your memory of the visual record to which Mr. Dursley refers?" Colin nervously nodded; Snape told him to think about the memory, which Snape then viewed. He sat in a student chair, staring straight ahead. "Fascinating."

"Do you think it is what we think it is?"

Snape nodded. "Almost certainly. I of course cannot evaluate the likelihood of it being a Muggle-produced fraud, but it would be in many ways consistent with what has happened until now."

"How do you mean?" asked Colin.

Snape sighed. "Use your mind, Mr. Creevey, use your reasoning ability. What is our enemy's goal? Voldemort's goal was to terrorize the populace, gather followers, and

eventually seize power. This enemy not only does not show his face to us, he does not even show it to those who do his bidding. I just returned from spending a few hours examining the mind of the man you apprehended, Mr. Dursley. You were correct, by the way; he was so powerful that he was impervious to most magic, but the notion of a punch in the nose never entered his mind.

"In any case, our enemy always used Polyjuice Potion when dealing with the man you caught. Apparently he expected the man to be caught eventually, and did not want his face to become known. Our enemy has no ego gratification needs, no need to be recognized. He does not recruit, so power is not his goal. His goal is arguably chaos, which he has created both here and in America. He kills many, but disproportionately from the higher strata of society, to create greater anxiety. He used the Dark Mark even after Malfoy died, seeking to create the impression that Voldemort still lived. Chaos, not power, the same sort of end starting a Muggle war would create... I find it very easy to believe we are talking about the same man."

"But why create chaos?" wondered Dudley. "What's the point?"

"Why create a beautiful painting, Mr. Dursley? Because one enjoys it. Some minds would enjoy what this man has wrought, thinking it a thing of beauty. There need not be a rational reason. In any case, I do believe this warrants further investigation."

"Great!" said Colin. "What should we do first?"

A smirk crossed Snape's face. "I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Creevey, but 'we' will do nothing. You and Mr. Dursley are not experienced investigators, and would be more a liability

than an asset in the field. Field operations can be very risky, and one does not undertake them with those in whom one does not have confidence. I admit I do need to be accompanied by a Muggle, someone who has excellent knowledge of how things are done in Muggle intelligence operations and law enforcement. Mr. Dursley, can you get in contact with Captain Ingersoll?"

Dudley was disappointed, but he supposed he could see Snape's point, and he should have thought of Ingersoll. "Not instantly, especially from here, but I should be able to fairly soon."

"Please do so."

The loss of Joe was another blow to Drake, caused by something almost as ridiculous as losing Malfoy to the house-elf. Joe could barely be harmed by magic, but he could fall victim to a physical attack. Just as it had been incredibly bad luck that the house-elf had once been Malfoy's, it was bad luck that the only person who would have thought of a physical attack was sitting near Joe. Amazing.

Amazing and annoying. It was partly his fault for not having foreseen it, he had to admit. He'd sent Joe into a crowded area, convinced that nothing would happen. The problem now was that he couldn't simply continue going to mercenary brokers and getting fresh people. They didn't take kindly to their people being killed or captured; it was bad for their business as brokers. Mercenaries wouldn't trust them, and it reduced their future business. A client who got more than one or two of their mercenaries taken out of action would quickly become blacklisted, and brokers worldwide shared information. He could recruit directly, but that took too much time.

He found that he was leaning towards using the ring himself. He knew what the effects of withdrawal were, having tested it on Malfoy, and felt that he could recover from them with a little time and the right potions. By now the Aurors would know about the ring, but knowing about it would do them little good against it. He wanted to keep up the pressure, especially on the Brits. He debated whether to intervene further with the American Muggles, but decided against it. The American President was reacting as Drake had expected he would, and the Iranians even better than expected. It was just a matter of time.

The next night, Snape and Ingersoll walked along the same street that Dudley and Colin had nearly two weeks before, heading away from the apartment of the young man who'd taken the video. This time only the man was there; he was very shaken at seeing more people interested in what he'd done. Snape did a Suggestion Charm on him to cause him to think that they were more government investigators, doing follow-up work; this only abated his anxiety somewhat, since he wasn't happy with government investigators of any type at the moment. Snape and Ingersoll stayed long enough to give anyone still listening or watching a chance to reach their location.

"I have cast a spell to cause what we say not to be heard outside a radius of two meters," said Snape as they walked. "Do you think they will come?"

Ingersoll shrugged. "This long after, they may not. For them, it was a longshot at best. But you never know. If they are here, your little spell should get them to come sooner, since they won't be able to hear what we're saying."

"That is the idea, of course," agreed Snape. "Now, we must head for the spot from which Messrs Creevey and Dursley

Disappeared. Behind a... what was the word?"

"A dumpster." To Snape's blank look, he added, "An oversized trash receptacle."

"Ah. Well, they are not exactly seasoned field operatives."

Ingersoll chuckled. "That'd be fair to say. I did feel bad for that poor kid. All he does is take a movie, and he gets all this hassle."

"No doubt Harry, when he comes back, will do something for him to counterbalance this."

"You mean like giving him a winning lottery ticket?"

"I did not have anything in particular in mind; Harry is most creative when it comes to doing things he is not supposed to do. Lifting your Memory Charm, for example."

Ingersoll raised an eyebrow. "You think he shouldn't have? Personally, I was glad he did."

"Clearly, it has had a beneficial result in this case. I only mean that it was indulgent of him. It was a small chance taken that need not have been taken. He prioritizes that which he thinks is right over being careful."

"People like that about him," responded Ingersoll. "You should see what people say about him on those websites."

Snape quickly rolled his eyes. "I know perfectly well, I often hear it in my classes. And due to an ill-advised newspaper interview I gave four years ago, students know I have a personal connection to him, so they sometimes ask me about him in class when they should be paying attention to their studies."

"I read that interview, on the websites," said Ingersoll; the comment seemed to further annoy Snape. "It was very soon after he took away the Memory Charm. I thought it was reasonable; you deserved to be recognized for all you'd done. Why do you say it was 'ill-advised?'"

"I thought that students would only take a minimal interest in it, and forget about it by the beginning of the next term. I discovered that as it involved events to which Harry was strongly connected, and my relationship with him, it was not to be forgotten so easily. Even now, first-year students ask me about it." Snape related the information with a long-suffering air.

"So, being known as a hero is annoying to you."

Snape gave Ingersoll a sideways glance, not sure whether or not he was being tweaked. "They lack the proper frame of reference to—"

"Over there," interrupted Ingersoll, who lightly steered Snape in the right direction.

"A charming means of waste disposal. It does much for the landscape."

"That's right, you guys just Vanish things. By the way, I wondered, when you Vanish something, where does it go?"

Snape shrugged. "It disappears."

"I know that, but do you mean, it just doesn't exist anymore?" Snape nodded. "Doesn't that contradict the law of conservation of energy, since mass and energy are just the same thing in different form?"

"There is a perfectly reasonable explanation—"

They were just about to turn the corner of the dumpster when two men stepped out of the place Colin and Dudley had Disapparated from, with guns pointed at Snape and Ingersoll. "A reasonable explanation for why you were heading for this dumpster?" asked one of the men, both of whom had short, dark hair and were wearing dark suits. "Hands behind your heads, please."

Snape and Ingersoll did as instructed, but in anticipation of what had happened, Snape had taken the precaution of making his wand invisible; he held it between the index and middle fingers of his right hand, enough contact to use it. He cast the Imperius Curse on one, then the other. Both holstered their weapons as Ingersoll lowered his hands. Snape then cast Legilimens on one, then the other.

"We are in luck," he informed Ingersoll. "These are the two who confiscated the video in the first place. They gave it to their superior at the... I cannot easily access the name of the organization in their memory. For what organization do you work?" he asked the men.

"The Bureau," answered one.

Snape frowned. "What bureau?"

Ingersoll smiled. "It's shorthand, it means the FBI." He smiled more at Snape's blank look. "Dudley is right, you people need to learn more about Muggle culture. It's America's national internal security organization."

"Fortunately, I am not the Muggle Studies instructor," sniffed Snape.

"I guess that is fortunate. Well, it should all be downhill from here. What's the name of the man they gave it to?"

"Gerald Parker, he is the head of their local division. I have his location; finding him will not be difficult."

"Good. We find him, then just keep following the trail, see how far it goes." They walked the men back to their van, where Snape applied a Memory Charm.

"The President has seen that video?" repeated Dudley, outraged. "Does he just not care, or what?"

Snape and Ingersoll had followed the trail which led from Parker to Parker's boss to the head of the FBI to the head of Homeland Security. Snape's last Legilimens scan, on the head of Homeland Security, had led them to where the video was being stored; it had been easy to find and procure it. They were now meeting with Colin, Dudley, Luna, and Arthur, who was both intrigued at what had been done and distressed by its illegality.

"He did not give Mr. Pierce—the head of Homeland Security—any particular reaction, except to suggest that what was depicted on the video was an impossibility," explained Snape. "He directed Mr. Pierce to store it with... some peculiar-sounding artifacts."

Ingersoll asked Snape to explain, then laughed when Snape related the conversation Pierce had with the President. "The President was joking," explained Ingersoll. "They don't really have any of those things, but many conspiracy theorists think they do."

Well, we have brains in the Department of Mysteries, so there is no reason that they shouldn't, thought Snape, annoyed at not having understood that it was a joke. "In any case, the President sought to make sure it was never seen again."

"And he really doesn't care that it suggests that Iran may not have done this?" asked Arthur.

"We could not get the President's perspective, as I did not consider it wise to get close enough to the President to use Legilimency on him," Snape explained. "In America, as you know, magic is prohibited in the area containing the country's important arms of Muggle government, including the President. I avoided that problem with a magic-detection-avoidance artifact, the same type we suspect our adversary of possessing. But we do not know that the Americans do not put a physical magical presence around the President; even a periodic one could be a problem. They may also check him for Memory Charms from time to time, so I did not wish to have to use one. Checking his memory, unfortunately, would virtually be an announcement of our interference."

"Which I would very much like to avoid," emphasized Arthur. "So, where does that leave us? Is this now a dead end?"

"Regarding this video, yes," said Snape. "I should also inform you that Mr. Pierce told the President that their experts were virtually certain that the video was genuine, even though it showed a seeming impossibility. Mr. Pierce could not explain the discrepancy, but he has grave doubts about Iran's responsibility, doubts he did not share with the President."

"Why not?" asked Colin.

"My guess would be that that's outside his territory," offered Ingersoll. "People treat the American President with a great deal of deference, and only a close personal friend would offer unsolicited opinions outside their area of responsibility, especially those that can't be backed up with solid, explainable evidence. The problem is that the people whose

area of responsibility it is almost certainly haven't seen this video. Not that it would change their opinions much, since it shows an impossibility."

"So the question now is, how do we proceed," said Arthur. "Opinions?"

"I can only give you advice on the Muggle side of things," said Ingersoll, "and I can't see the benefit in pursuing this any further there. The mainstream media would never show this; they'd assume it was a fake. Bloggers would, and it could get out that way, but it would be a minor curiosity, no one would take it very seriously. Even if we somehow exposed the government's role, they'd just deny it. We can't make them take it seriously unless they know about magic. If any use is going to come of this, it has to be from your side."

"The problem with that," said Dudley sadly, "is that no one's going to care. Even if this convinced them that a wizard did this, to wizards it would be a minor story, something that the Ministry should deal with. If it doesn't affect them, they don't care."

Ingersoll nodded. "I've heard that before, not to mention seen it, all too many times."

"The only thing that could make an impact," said Colin, "and I hate to say it, would be to go to the American wizard government and tell them about this, all of it, including this mission. With a lot of luck, they could be persuaded to check the President's memory—does their President know about magic, like Barclay does?"

"I don't know," said Arthur.

"Anyway, if they checked his memory and found that he didn't know it was magic, they could tell him, and maybe he'd back down militarily. The problem, of course, is that Arthur, as head of the Muggle Liaison office, would have to be the one to tell him. They'd be angry that we broke diplomatic protocol by investigating on their territory, and it would be public. It would definitely hurt Arthur's campaign, maybe sink it. Trent would be like, look at the lengths this man will go to, to interfere in Muggle affairs. He'd make a week's worth of hay out of it."

"Look, if this could stop a war, that can't be my primary concern," said Arthur. "I'd obviously accept that. But I have serious doubts that they would accept it as certain that it meant a wizard did this. They'd want time to think about it, at least, and some of them would know that this could have been faked with Muggle technology. All kinds of things could go wrong..."

"And your campaign would have been torpedoed for nothing," finished Dudley.

"I've already said, my campaign shouldn't be considered in this. But we also should consider—what if the President does know about magic? He might know, and do nothing anyway, because implicating Iran somehow serves his purposes."

"It indisputably serves his purposes," interjected Ingersoll. "You have to understand how this President works, and I can very much see him knowing this meant Iran wasn't responsible, and not caring. He hasn't hidden that he wants to bring democracy to the Middle East. Many people think he wouldn't mind a war right now. It would be very difficult for America to win such a war while still holding onto a precarious Iraq. But the President might think he doesn't need to win, but just to cause enough chaos in Iran that the

younger generation—there are a lot of disaffected young people in Iran—might rise up in revolt."

Arthur shook his head. "I can't imagine that someone would start a war for a reason like that. But if he knows about magic, the Americans will stiff us. They'll say, even if magic caused the situation in the first place, it's the President's place to ask us to rectify it, and we're not going to interfere in Muggle affairs over his objections. It'll be hard enough to get them to consider any kind of interference in the first place."

"But there's already been interference!" exclaimed a frustrated Dudley. "Shouldn't you interfere to set it right whether the Americans like it or not?"

"In a perfect world, yes," said Arthur with a light sigh.

"And what about the Iranian wizards?" persisted Dudley. "Shouldn't they be told, and involved? Their country might end up going to war because of this, too!"

"Technically, we call them Persian wizards, but you have a point. However, all that happened there was that someone was magically taken from their soil. I can talk to them, but I don't think they'd want to get involved either."

"Keep in mind, Mr. Dursley," said Snape, noticing Dudley's growing frustration, "that from what I have gathered today, both sides have used this to further their agendas. The Iranians could have cooperated with the Americans, but instead chose to provoke them. The American President has a number of reasons to be doubtful of Iran's involvement, but has very likely willfully disregarded them. An action taken by magic may have precipitated this, but both sides have the power to stop it, and they have not. It can be

reasonably argued that the magical world is not responsible for what happens."

"But the magical world should know about this," argued Dudley. "Maybe they don't care, but I think they're partly responsible if they knew about this and didn't stop it. Maybe you're right, maybe the Americans will ignore it, maybe the magical public won't care. But that information should be out there."

There was a pause. "Unfortunately, I agree with Dudley," said Colin somberly. "It seems like the right thing to do."

Arthur looked around. "Archibald, you've been very quiet. What do you think?"

Dentus looked uncomfortable. "As your campaign adviser, I think it's a terrible idea. You'd be taking responsibility for the usurping of another country's prerogatives, and it probably wouldn't accomplish anything. It could only hurt your campaign. But the problem is... as a history professor, I think it's exactly the right thing to do. Even if it does no good, it's in the historical record. Magical history can record that a Muggle war, if it comes to that, was caused in large part by magical actions, and we cared so little that we did nothing to stop it. So, that's what I think, in both my roles."

Watching, Luna found that she had no doubt as to what Arthur would do; he would do the right thing. He's such a good man, she thought. Strange how he was in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department for so long, not attracting any notice, but was doing exactly what a leader should do when put into this position. Of course, she knew that personal virtue and career accomplishment hardly went hand in hand, and was sure that plenty of good people went unnoticed. Our society needs him, but we're not going to get

him, because we don't deserve him. But speaking of deserving...

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sudden entrance of a phoenix. "Hello, again," said a smiling Colin. "This one's been around a bit recently. Maybe she's the official campaign phoenix."

The phoenix flew down and landed on Luna's shoulder. "Hello," said Luna as she reached up to pet it, wondering what it would feel like later when she experienced it as the phoenix. Very strange, she thought, to be able to pet the phoenix that was her. Snape gave the human Luna a penetrating stare; he clearly knew exactly what was happening. She looked back innocently, but with a small smile.

"Well, what do you think?" Arthur asked the phoenix humorously.

The phoenix flew off of Luna's shoulder, and onto Dudley's. "Maybe that means she agrees with Dudley," mused Colin as Dudley reached up to pet her.

"It wouldn't surprise me." With a helpless shrug, Arthur said, "All right, this is really the only thing to do. I'll talk to George—George Fenton, my American counterpart—tomorrow morning, after which I'll tell the Prophet. Better that they hear it first from me than from the diplomatic protest the Americans will probably make."

As Luna watched, she suddenly knew why her phoenix self had come; to take a phoenix-look at Arthur Weasley. Then she immediately realized that because of Fawkes, the phoenixes would already know about Arthur. She wondered what the situation was with that, but she knew she would find out soon.

"You went on a mission with that Ingersoll guy?" asked Ginny in surprise, later that evening.

"He was perfectly competent, of course," said Snape. "Did you know that Harry had restored his memory?"

She shook her head. "He probably just didn't think to mention it."

"That was the same day he allowed Voldemort to walk through the Veil, so he probably forgot about it rather quickly," agreed Snape.

"Did you think he shouldn't have done that?" she asked. "Most people were okay with it at the time."

"After what he accomplished, most people would have been 'okay with' most anything he did," Snape pointed out. "I understand why Harry did what he did; it is simply his nature. But it is rare enough that people get what they deserve, and even if Tom Riddle was no longer Voldemort, strictly speaking, he still deserved the fate that Harry spared him. In the case of Ingersoll, I gather it was the same sort of thought; Harry simply felt it was the right thing to do. It did turn out for the best, though your father may suffer politically for what Captain Ingersoll and I did. He will not identify who went on the mission, and he will truthfully say the mission was undertaken without his knowledge, but he will be blamed for it anyway, since he will admit he knows who it was but will not reveal it."

"Well, that's Dad. He's very honorable, which is why he's going to lose on Thursday."

"Unfortunately, yes," agreed Snape. "I am surprised to hear you say that, though. I would have thought you would have a more positive attitude."

"I'm just being realistic. Mum's talked to a lot of people, she's been pretty relentless in talking him up, but even she can see where this is going. People think Dad is a good guy, but they don't take him seriously. He doesn't fit their image of what a Minister of Magic should be like, and Trent does. Which is really awful, since Dad would be ten times as good a Minister as Trent. What are you going to do, anyway? You're as good as sacked on Friday, and Trent will probably try to have you arrested."

"I can hide out at your place," he joked. "They would never find me there."

She chuckled. "That's true. You're very welcome to, of course."

"I think I will manage, thank you. I may be able to hold out longer than you think. But were I forced to flee, I think it safe to say that the Aurors would not expend significant manpower to hunt me down."

"Yes, it's safe to say," she agreed. "Well, let's start the practice."

He gave her more advice about the proper mental approach to Legilimency, had her do a few practice mental exercises, then she practiced on him again. After twenty minutes of trying, in only her fifth lesson, she got into his mind.

He raised an eyebrow. "Congratulations; that was very quick progress."

She smiled. "I'm very motivated."

"Yes, you are," he agreed. "Now, you should keep practicing. Get in, and look for images of love."

Her eyebrows went high. "Will there be any?"

He almost smiled. "You might be surprised."

She cast Legilimency on him again, focusing on bringing up memories of love. Nothing happened for a moment. She suddenly saw an image of a younger Dumbledore kissing his wife, holding her. She could feel his love for her in Snape's memory of the event. Then another memory came up: it was the night Malfoy had snatched her off the Hogwarts grounds and transported her into the Chamber, when Harry had created the Killing Curse shield. After Malfoy left the Chamber, Harry had looked into her eyes, and suddenly known he was in love with her. She saw the memory, but it was Harry's memory, not hers. She felt his love, and his fear for her. Then she saw what happened later. She saw Harry tell her he was in love with her, and again, she could feel, in the memory, how much he loved her. She saw herself tell him the same thing, and felt how happy it made him.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she put down her wand. She started to sob, partly in happiness at seeing so clearly how he felt about her. Ever since he and Hermione had first exchanged feelings via the phoenixes, she had wanted to be able to feel his love for her as he felt it. Finally, she could. But she realized she was also crying for another reason. The only memories of love Snape has are someone else's, he has none of his own. That's so sad, she thought. Well, that's what I'm trying to do here, see that he at least has a chance at that.

He moved closer to her, and with only a little awkwardness, put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. Through her tears, Ginny smiled. He's learning.

At about the same time, Colin and Luna were having dinner in a restaurant, one of the several wizarding restaurants near the Ministry, invisible to Muggles. To her pleasure, he had asked her this time. I guess I've made it so clear that he felt confident enough to ask me, she thought. "So, how's Dudley doing today? Are people treating him differently at the Ministry?"

Colin chuckled. "He's enjoying his fifteen minutes, that's for sure." To her quizzical expression, he shook his head in dismay at himself. "I'll probably never stop using Muggle phrases. It's a Muggle thing, someone once said that everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame. It's not really true, of course, but it's something we say especially when someone who wasn't well-known suddenly is. Thinking about Harry, he probably wishes it really were only fifteen minutes."

"I'm sure that's true. I haven't had my fifteen minutes, though. But I don't think I'd really want it."

"It doesn't have to be worldwide fame, it can just be local fame. I think you had it when you were the first one to get the energy of love. There was a lot of attention on you for a while."

"Yes, but thank goodness, those two Slytherin second years helped take it off of me. I don't think I'd like to be famous. How about you?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes I think it would be nice, but I remember that Harry didn't like it. Of course, it was ironic that how I reacted to him was exactly part of the reason he didn't like it. I didn't understand that then, of course, we never do when we're young. I feel sort of stupid about it now, even though I try to shrug off the jokes I get about it."

"I'm sorry," she said, looking concerned. "I made one of those jokes, the first day I came to the Ministry."

He waved off her apology. "It's okay. It's not that I feel stupid every time someone makes a joke about it. Like I said before, we all have something like that. I just wish I had understood things better."

She nodded. "I know the feeling. I guess we just understand things when we're meant to understand them."

Just then, a female phoenix appeared in the restaurant, flying around and finally perching on the top of a partition separating one row of booths from another. Colin could hear a lot of excited conversation as the customers talked about the conspicuous new arrival. "Her again!" exclaimed Colin. He smiled at Luna, a thought suddenly occurring. "I wonder if she wants to bond with you, maybe she's checking you out."

Luna broke into a broad smile at the absurdity of the notion. "I don't think so. I think she's been around you more than me. Why do you assume it's me?"

"Because... you have this... I don't know, this peace about you, that I'm sure would be very attractive to a phoenix. I know it's very attractive to me," he added quickly, as if to get the words out before his nerve failed him.

She smiled again, this time from pleasure, not humor. "Thank you, Colin. That's very sweet."

He shrugged. "It's true. You've always been like that. I remember even back in seventh year thinking I'd like to ask you out."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I don't know... I just wasn't good at that sort of thing. It was like I didn't know the right words, or the right way to be, or something. It's hard to explain. I just couldn't get myself to do it. I still find it difficult; we wouldn't be here if you hadn't asked me first. I'm just glad you did."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm glad too. But you shouldn't be so quick to assume it's me. You underestimate yourself. I think there's a lot a phoenix would like about you."

He was very surprised. "You really think so?"

She smiled and gripped his hand a little. "I'm very sure of it."

Arthur Apparated into Harry's home in the early afternoon, shortly after the working day began on America's east coast. "How did it go, with Fenton?" asked Dentus.

Arthur had already given an interview to the Prophet about the events in America and what he would tell Fenton; they would also feature a picture that would display the key points of the video the young American took that suggested a wizard was involved. "He was very alarmed at the thought that wizards might have helped start a Muggle war, and he promised a full and fast investigation backed by the unstinting help of their government." A hint of Arthur's discouragement betrayed his words.

"I see. In other words, it didn't go well."

"As we expected. He was angrier that I wouldn't tell him who did it than that it was done at all. He said a lot of the stuff I expected him to say, like, how would I feel if a bunch of American wizards were snooping around Britain, that national boundaries should be respected, that it showed a lack of consideration of their laws, and so forth. I wanted to

tell him that if they'd been more responsive it wouldn't have been necessary, but I knew we were in the wrong here, so I held my tongue. Difficult though it was."

"They're not going to help?"

"He said they'd look into it, but he didn't sound very enthusiastic. He did say that they do brief the President, and only him, on magic. And, as I expected, that disinclines him to take aggressive action. I also discovered that he didn't even know that America and Iran could be fighting any second! Apparently one of his guys knows about it, but follows Muggle events more as a hobby, not for his job. It was very depressing."

"But not unexpected," pointed out Dentus.

"No. But there is one more thing I'm going to do. I can't do it until tonight, though, and only if Kingsley agrees." He explained to Dentus what he had in mind.

Dentus was taken aback. "If this gets out..."

"Both Kingsley and I will be in a lot of trouble, I know. But he'll help. It's the right thing to do."

Eight hours later, Kingsley sighed in discomfort. "You're asking me to help you do something that requires the power of the Minister. I know that Trent would never give his approval, and it would only be for political reasons. But still..."

"We have to do this, Kingsley," said Arthur. "It may not do any good, but if it works, it could save thousands of lives."

Kingsley thought about it. "All right. But I'm not telling any other Aurors about this. If we get found out, it's just going to

be me. Just one thing before we go; I have to deactivate the reading we get from his magic-detection pendant. It's set not to recognize me, but it will recognize you."

After he returned, Kingsley put his hand on Arthur's shoulder, and they Apparated to 10 Downing Street.

Prime Minister Kenneth Barclay tried hard to keep his temper in check. "Is it true, Mr. President? Have you seen the video clip that the wizards just showed me?" Even though he was the leader of America's closest ally, he'd had to insist that it was a grave emergency before he could convince the President's chief of staff to forward his call to the President. He'd interrupted the President's dinner, but he'd had his own dinners interrupted many times.

"Yes, I've seen it. But it didn't prove anything." The President sounded peeved, Barclay thought. "They can fake things like that. You know that."

It was getting harder and harder for Barclay to rein in his anger. "You were told by your experts, with near certainty, that it was genuine!"

"How do you know that?"

"The wizards told me," responded Barclay. "They can access people's memories. They followed the trail from those who seized the video until it led to you. They now have it, and are considering releasing it."

"They can't do that! It shows what's either magic or a fraud. They can't tell people it was magic, so it'll be assumed it was a fraud."

"They think it might create enough doubt about what happened that it could affect public opinion. But, Mr.

President, that's not the point. You know and I know that this was done by magic, that Iran did not do it—"

"I do not know that. I admit the video, if not a fraud, strongly suggests magic, but it hardly proves anything."

"I'm not talking about proof, Mr. President, I'm talking about what we know. I know, I am convinced, that Iran did not do this, that it was done by a wizard to make it appear that Iran did it. This wizard is apparently active in the wizarding sections of both our countries as well, killing dozens and causing political strife. Nothing is proved, but for those who know about the existence of magic, there is more than enough doubt to justify exercising restraint. The special relationship between our two countries is very important to me, Mr. President. I implore you to take no steps that would further strain it." *If you do this, we won't be with you.* It wasn't like Barclay to be so unsubtle, but this was a dangerous situation, and the President was being willfully obstinate.

There was a sigh in the President's voice. "All right, Ken. I promise that we'll take no further military action, unless provoked, without talking to you first."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I would also hope that you could see your way clear towards talking your country down, putting less emphasis on Iran as the culprit and more on the mysterious nature of what happened."

"Look, somebody has to pay for this. Not that I'm convinced, but we can't tell our people it was wizards, and Iran hasn't exactly been falling all over itself to help. Where do you suggest we point the finger?"

Barclay restrained a sudden urge to tell the President exactly where he could put his finger. "Terrorists, which

would not be a lie. Fold it into the overall war on terror, try to channel your country's anger that way."

There was a pause. "I'll talk to my people, see what we can work out."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I'll let you go now, I'm sorry to have interrupted your dinner. I truly felt that this could not wait."

"Well, one good thing about being President, the kitchen staff have lots of experience at reheating food. Have a good night."

"You too," said Barclay, and he hung up the phone.

He sat back in his chair and thought. That idiot, he fumed silently. But he's not really an idiot, he knew what that video meant; he just never thought he'd have to explain to anyone why he ignored it. He acted like he got caught with his hand in the cookie jar, which he did. That wizard wanted to make it look like Iran was responsible for the sarin attack, and the President lapped it up, because it was what he wanted as well. Hardly a new political sin, I suppose, to choose what fits one's political agenda over what's true and right. I know he's doing what he thinks is right, because he wants a new government in Tehran. But Britain doesn't want another war, and I can't survive one politically. He knows that, but he thought he could get away with just one more. Thank goodness those wizards came to me.

It's been a long day, thought Arthur as he climbed into bed at the Burrow. Not only for me; it's hard for Molly and the others too, some of them are campaigning as hard as I am. And then I do something like I did today, something that could have set the campaign back quite a bit, just because

it was the right thing to do. No wonder Archibald gets annoyed sometimes.

Molly walked in and started getting ready for bed. "How did it go with the Muggle Prime Minister?"

"Better than other meetings. He was interested, and receptive to what we had to say. Unfortunately, I got the impression that that was only because what we were telling him fit his agenda. But right now, I'll take what I can get."

"Were you just talking with Archibald?"

"Just a quick meeting before bed. Some good news, actually. He told me that the brouhaha today—the American protest, Trent's railing at me based on it—apparently hasn't hurt me. People's attitude is, Americans protested diplomatically, so what. It doesn't affect them. Weasley poked his nose into Muggle affairs, well, that's his job. Some people are actually taking an interest in what's going on now because of that video the paper showed. Not many, mind you, but it's a good start."

"That's good, dear. I'm hearing that Trent is attacking you so much that people are starting to get tired of it. People are saying that he spends too much time attacking you and not enough saying what specific things he's going to do. They don't like a campaign that's so negative."

"But that's only a few people."

"Yes," she admitted unhappily. "But it feels like it might be the beginning of a trend."

Arthur smiled. "My wife, the optimist." Molly got into bed and snuggled up against her husband. His smile vanishing, he added, "I'm not going to win this, you know."

She looked like she wanted to protest, but saw the look in his eyes. "It does look that way. Do you regret having done it?"

Arthur found he didn't have to think very hard. "No, I don't. Losing the Burrow is bad, but we can find someplace else. The rest of it doesn't matter. I am glad that the people will at least have a choice."

"Do you think Harry's phoenix-intuition reason was that your candidacy gave this possible Muggle war greater visibility, and that we should be more careful?"

"Who knows, but that looks like the best explanation now. Based on Barclay's reaction to what we said, I'm a little more hopeful about the Muggle situation. If this helps stop a war, of course it'll have been more than worth it. And it's been a very interesting experience. A lot of bad along with the good, of course; you get to see a lot of bad things in politics, which is why I don't like it. But a lot of people have come up to me and said they think what I'm doing is good, and they support it. Even if I don't win this, knowing that a lot of people support me is very nice, because they're supporting the idea of a different way of doing politics."

Fawkes suddenly appeared in the bedroom, and perched on the headboard of their bed. "Hello, Fawkes," said Arthur.

"What do you suppose he's doing here?" wondered Molly.

"Offering his support," half-joked Arthur. "I imagine he's here on Harry's behalf."

"It's nice having him around," said Molly, looking up for a few seconds. "That reminds me, one thing that's especially nice about this is the way you have almost the unanimous

support of the people who can use the energy of love. It's really remarkable."

"I was surprised at the number. I have to wonder whether it's because my message just appeals to those people, or because they were taught by Harry or someone close to Harry, and they support me because of my connection to Harry."

"I think it's the first one," said Molly. "I think it's a combination of that, and their dislike of Trent's message. When you get right down to it, he appeals to people's fear. People who use the energy of love are more sensitive to that, and they don't like it."

"That makes sense," agreed Arthur. "Thinking about that actually gives me hope for the future. If enough people learn the energy of love, someone with a message like mine could actually become Minister. It could really happen."

Molly smiled. "And that's another possible reason for Harry's intuition. It could point the way to the future."

"On that happy thought, let's go to sleep," suggested Arthur. He turned out the lights with his wand, kissed Molly goodnight, and soon drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, most of the usual people—Arthur, Molly, Dentus, Ron, Pansy, Ginny, and Luna—were in Harry's kitchen, waiting for the meals from the Hogwarts house-elves. It was six-thirty, and the food usually came around that time. Dentus was reading the Sunday Prophet, having just returned from their offices. Fawkes was there as well.

"Well, this confirms the impression I got yesterday," said Dentus as he read. "Snape and Ingersoll's trip to America isn't going to hurt you, and there's even a side article about

the sarin gas attack and the current state of affairs between America and Iran. It's the first article they've had about Muggle affairs since nine-eleven, and one of their editorials addresses the question of whether—more in general than in this specific case—wizards should intervene to put right Muggle events that they affected. The editorial itself suggests that we should be very careful about that, but it's good to at least see it discussed."

"Did Trent have any comment on it?" asked Arthur.

"No, as of yesterday evening he was still hammering away at you for the American complaint, and for not revealing who went. He hasn't addressed the issue itself yet, but I think we know what answer to expect; the one that's politically best at the time. But he'll have to comment sooner or later. I think he'll stop attacking you for that today, as he realizes it isn't working." House-elves started teleporting in to deliver the morning's food; they were thanked by the humans, who eagerly began eating.

"Well, I'm just happy to have brought up the issue," said Arthur. "I hope the Prime Minister made some headway with the President about that. By the way, Pansy, maybe you could tell me what's going on. Fawkes was with Molly and I last night, and he's here now, and I was wondering why. I assumed he was here on Harry's behalf, like Harry would want him to lend his presence to be helpful to us. But I'd like to know if Fawkes, or the phoenixes, will tell you anything."

Pansy was silent for a moment as she traded impressions with Red, then an expression of great surprise came over her face. "What?" asked Ron.

"I was surprised because what Red told me was something that I think, Red thinks, has never happened before," Pansy

explained. "Fawkes and Harry aren't bonded anymore."

Everyone stopped eating and stared at Pansy in astonishment. "That's impossible," said Ginny, worried about how it might affect Harry. "Phoenixes bond for life."

Pansy's light shrug conveyed that she had thought so, too. "Yes, but if you think about it, Harry died that day. Phoenixes die, and are reborn. This is a unique situation.

"I should say that this is something Harry and Fawkes agreed on. They'll still always have a connection, since the bond is more a mental thing than physical, but Fawkes would have had to re-bond with him once he became human again to have the same connection they had before. They decided that wasn't necessary, though of course Fawkes would have done it if Harry had wanted him to. You see, Harry doesn't need to be bonded with a phoenix—"

"Because he *is* a phoenix," interrupted Ginny, understanding.

"That's right. Red tells me that as he gets used to being a phoenix, more phoenix traits will start creeping into his human side. He'll be able to access the spiritual realm more easily, like, for example, Luna can do," Pansy said, gesturing to Luna, who tried to keep her face expressionless. "He'll access his intuition better, that sort of thing. He'll learn to adapt phoenix-type thinking to being human. Like, now, when he's a phoenix, he can think like a human can, it's just harder. What I'm talking about is just the reverse—thinking like a phoenix while a human. It's a little harder, but he'll learn to do it. So, the point of this is that he doesn't really need a phoenix to companion him anymore. Also, part of what phoenixes like about companioning humans is the variety; companioning different people gives them different

experiences. As we'd discussed, Harry could live a very long time, and if Fawkes stayed with Harry, Harry might be his only companion. So Harry and Fawkes... not discussed, but communicated with their feelings, and this was the result. So, Fawkes is now free."

"Wow," said Ron. "It makes sense, even if it seems really strange at the same time. So, is Fawkes going to bond with someone else now, or is he just going to hang out with us for awhile?"

Pansy smiled, happy to be the one to break the news. "He's already decided. He's bonding with Arthur."

Again, all were stunned, especially Arthur. Beaming, Molly stood and moved behind Arthur's chair to lean over and hug him from behind. "Oh, Arthur, it's so wonderful! I'm so thrilled!"

Arthur touched his wife's arm in acknowledgment of her gesture, but was still in mild shock. "Aren't I a little old? I'm fifty-five, and I thought they usually bonded with people in their forties."

"That's the most common," agreed Pansy, "but fifties isn't rare."

"Congratulations, Arthur," said a smiling Dentus. "You deserve it." The others chimed in with their congratulations.

Ron chuckled. "Probably when people find out about this, they'll think it means that Fawkes is endorsing your candidacy."

"The timing is interesting," agreed Dentus, "but it makes sense, given the timing of what happened with Harry. "Just a coincidence, I'd suspect."

"Not exactly," explained Pansy. "One thing that contributes to phoenixes seeing humans as suitable for bonding is if the humans has been through a... crisis, I guess you could say, some very stressful situation, and had to make some difficult choices. Fawkes bonded with Harry on the very day that Harry decided to fight Voldemort in those dreams, which was a very hard decision. Flora joined Hermione after that awful summer she had between sixth and seventh year, when she had worked out some things about herself. It's not the same in every case, but it's common. Arthur's made some difficult choices recently, like submitting to the Choosing in the face of overwhelming odds, and just yesterday, highlighting the Muggle situation even when it could have killed his candidacy. Making a choice that benefits others over yourself is one of the things that phoenixes recognize and appreciate."

There was a silence, and people started returning to their food, which was starting to get cold. "So, was he with me all night last night?"

Pansy nodded. "You should start noticing it more strongly in a day or two. Even now, you should be getting the feelings of calm." She smiled and added, "Not that you weren't pretty calm in the first place."

"He had to be," joked Molly. "Look who he's married to."

Ron smiled. "If one of us said that..."

"You'd be in trouble, and rightfully so," chided his mother.

"Is this going to help him win, Archibald?" asked Ron.

"I've already been thinking about that, of course, which I'm sure Arthur hasn't. I truly don't know. I will say that it can't hurt, but it may not help much, since people don't expect

their political leaders to be the type to have a phoenix. My best guess is that it will tilt some undecided people to Arthur's side."

"Wow," said Arthur, almost to himself. "This is amazing. This has turned out to be a very good thing to do, even though I'm probably going to lose; a few good things have come of it. Thank you, Fawkes. I'm very honored."

"He knows," Pansy assured him. "Even now, he's getting your feelings, even if you can't get his yet."

Suddenly a popping sound came from another room, and Colin and Dudley walked into the kitchen, looking grim. "Hi, everyone," said Colin. He gave Luna an extra glance and a small smile. She smiled back, but could see something was disturbing him.

"Hello, boys," greeted Arthur. "It's awfully early for you, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it," agreed Dudley. "He Apparated to my apartment, dragged me out of bed. But it turns out there was a good reason."

"A few hours ago, Iran was bombed in three locations," reported Colin. "The attack was against their alleged nuclear facilities."

Arthur closed his eyes in frustration. "Damn," he said quietly. "Has there been any reaction from Iran yet?"

"No," said Dudley, "but it would be a little too soon anyway. That wouldn't happen for another day, at least."

"Are you going to try to talk to the Persian wizards?" asked Colin.

Arthur sighed. "I probably will, but I know it won't do any good. They'd have to be willing to act fast, and I don't think they would. They'd also probably say that Muggle Iran has every reason to attack Americans, considering what's happened, that the Iranian Muggles aren't acting in response to something that was done by magic. I guess Barclay wasn't successful in trying to restrain the Americans."

"The bombing wasn't done by the Americans," said Colin. "The Israelis did it."

Arthur gaped. "What?!"

"Yeah, it seemed strange," agreed Dudley. "But it makes sense if you think about it. First of all, Israel's done this before; they bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor in the early eighties. They have nuclear weapons, but their rule is, no Arab country is allowed to have them. Israel's never been shy about using its military power. Secondly, this lets America off the hook for what happens. America would have had a political problem explaining to the world, even its own citizens, why it bombed Iran when they knew it could start a war. Now, they can say, we didn't start the war, the Israelis bombed them, not us. If they're mad, they should attack the Israelis. But of course they won't, because everyone in governments knows that Israel wouldn't have done this without the Americans' agreement. No one who follows this is going to be fooled. But the general public who doesn't pay much attention to this sort of thing will be like, 'Iran shouldn't have attacked the Americans in Iraq, because they didn't do anything.' There's no proof that Israel was doing it for the Americans, and they'll deny it. So, it was better for the Americans that Israel did it."

There was silence as people considered that; some, like Ginny, Ron, and Pansy, didn't know enough about Muggle events to make sense out of it. "You sure know a lot about this," remarked Ron.

Dudley shrugged. "It's my job. After nine-eleven, Colin and I had a kind of a crash course in the Middle East situation."

"Iran could be bluffing with this," pointed out Colin. "Their bluff was just called, so now we'll see whether they were serious or not. They still might not invade."

Arthur shook his head. "Barclay must be furious. He said last night that he didn't want this escalated. Will he know that the Americans agreed to this?"

"Of course," said Colin confidently. "And he's already made a statement, they woke him up when it happened. He condemned Israel for the bombing, called on Iran not to do anything, and suggested three-way talks between Iran, America, and Britain. Neither Iran nor America is going to agree to that, but we think he just did it so the British public would know he was serious about stopping it. We think that the British Parliament will bring up a motion calling on Barclay to remove the British troops from Iraq now, and we think it would pass. And he might be angry enough to do it."

"Which would really screw the Americans. Sorry," added Dudley hastily to Molly, who gave him a warning glance about his language. "They're going to have a very hard time as it is, they can't have thirty thousand British troops leaving. And it would encourage the Iraqi insurgents; for the Americans, it would be like trying to fight when bees are swarming around you and stinging you. The Americans are gambling that the Brits won't leave, that their air power can slow down the Iranians, and that Iranian young people will

riot. But the problem with it being Israel is that the Iranian leaders can sell the war to the young people better. See, look how Israel is the right hand of the Americans, it's the same enemy. Anyway, it's a mess, and if Iran attacks..."

Arthur nodded solemnly. "I can imagine. Well, I'll contact the Persian wizards first thing, try to talk to them as soon as possible. I know there's not much hope, but I have to try. And yes, Archibald, I know there are events scheduled. I'll do what I can, but this is more important." Ironical, thought Arthur, that I have to postpone one nearly-hopeless effort—getting Chosen Minister—for another one, trying to stop this war. Two high-stakes matters, both of which I'm likely to fail at. This was definitely a good time to be joined by a phoenix.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and Colin had nothing in particular to do. He thought about visiting Diagon Alley and watching the rebuilding—Trent had eventually reluctantly acceded to Arthur's challenge, and they had signed the legislation approving the funds for rebuilding—but even though he generally found watching magical building interesting, he wasn't in the mood for it. He could follow the fast-developing events in the Muggle world, but that was too much like work.

Walking through the Hogsmeade park, he found himself thinking about the day's events. Arthur had failed to make any headway with the Persian wizards, to no one's surprise, and he had discovered that four people had been killed the night before, including yet another undersecretary. He glanced around at the thought, wondering if a Dark wizard might pop in out of nowhere and attack. I'd be safer if I was walking around with Dudley, he joked to himself.

He'd been happy for Dudley, for the recognition and praise he'd gotten for subduing the attacker at Florean Fortescue's.

Dudley hadn't had an easy time of it in the magical world, thought Colin. He'd started out with two strikes against him: he was known to have bullied Harry as a child, and he was the only Muggle working at the Ministry. Many had thought less of him for either or both reasons. But he had done his job every day, appearing not to care how he was thought of. Now he was getting more notice; a Muggle-born witch had even asked him out the day before. He'd been surprised, but accepted. Only because she's good-looking, thought Colin wryly. Dudley had never made any bones about appearance being important to a future partner.

The thought made him think of Luna. She wasn't pretty in any standard way; he thought of her appearance as kind of plain, but plain in a good way. She didn't wear makeup or do anything to otherwise enhance her appearance, which was probably why she looked that way. Her eyes were very nice, though, and he knew he certainly wasn't the type that was going to attract a beauty. Probably if you love someone, he thought, they look better to you than they looked otherwise. Luna looked very good to him right then.

He found himself near the statue; the 'Voldemort statue,' as it was occasionally and very unofficially called, since it was a tribute to, and contained all the names of, those who had died at the hands of Voldemort and the Death Eaters. He glanced up at the phoenix, and read some of the names, looking for ones he knew. He didn't like looking at the statue especially, because it reminded him that he hadn't participated in the broom battle to defend Hogwarts, and a dozen names on the statue were there because they had. He'd never totally come to terms with not having gone. He understood it rationally—he hadn't yet been seventeen, and his parents had told him not to go, so he hadn't gone. But he very much wished he had; he wanted to be able to look with

pride at a monument like that and know that he had risked what these people had risked.

He suddenly heard a voice behind him. "I'm glad you didn't go," said Luna, her tone serious.

He whirled to see her standing right behind him. "How did you—wow, you're quiet." It's easy when you have a remote eye and can teleport, she thought. "How did you know I was thinking about that?"

She shrugged. "It's what I think when I look at this."

"Yeah, but you went."

"I almost didn't. I didn't want to, and Daddy didn't want me to."

"Then why did you go?"

She looked at the names as she spoke. "Because I was one of the few, at that time, who could use the Killing Curse shield. Then, it was only me, the Auror Winston Clark, the two Slytherin second years who weren't supposed to go but did anyway, and Harry and the other five. I felt like it was my responsibility to go, and Daddy eventually agreed, though he was terrified that something would happen to me. After my mother, he couldn't bear the idea of losing me as well. But he knew I could save lives, so he let me go, and I did. But I'll tell you one thing." She turned to look at him, and he felt that no one had ever looked at him in quite that way before, with such compassion in her eyes. "If I hadn't had that shield, I wouldn't have gone. I know that. And I'm sure—don't ask me how I know, but I know—that if you'd had the shield, you'd have defied your parents and gone. I don't see you and I as being any different in that situation."

He felt tears welling up, and tried to hold them back. He put his arm around her; she leaned into him, pulling him into a hug. He took a deep breath as he held her. "I hope you're right," he finally said.

"I am," she said. "You'll find that out about me. I'm goofy, but usually right."

He chuckled. "If you're goofy, it's only in a good way. I like that about you."

She pulled out of the hug enough to face him, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you. I like that about me too."

He smiled and took her hand. "I'm really glad you showed up. I feel like I'd like to do something, but I'm not sure what. Are you free for a while?"

"Yes, I am. Tell me, is there anything you've always wanted to do, but never done?"

He smiled again; his immediate thought was, yes, but I'm not going to suggest that, I know she didn't mean that anyway. He wondered if his smile had given away what he wished hadn't come into his head. "Let me think for a minute." He looked around the park, then had an idea. "Yes, there is one thing, but we'd have to go to Gringotts and get some American currency. Your saying you were 'goofy' made me think of this. They have this place in America that they call 'The Happiest Place On Earth.' I'd like to go there."

"That sounds good. But what does being goofy have to do with it?"

"I'll explain when we get there. Come on."

An hour later they were walking among the crowds, which were heavy even though it was still early in the day on the American west coast. Colin had an ice cream cone, and Luna, cotton candy. Luna looked around, taking it all in. "So, they call this place the 'Magic Kingdom,' but I bet if we did magic here, people would stare at us."

He smiled at the thought. "Yes, that's safe to say. I think Muggles often use 'magic' or 'magical' to describe something exciting, that inspires the imagination. They don't mean it literally. But that ride was pretty fun, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. You get pretty wet, which is okay if you have drying charms. But I liked it, I could do it a few more times. Those lines are getting pretty long, though."

"Yes, and they'll just get longer," agreed Colin. "I wonder if some wizards ever come here and just use magic to get to the head of lines."

"I would hope not. That wouldn't be fair."

"I'll bet some do, but of course you're right, it wouldn't be fair."

They had finished their snacks; Luna took his hand. "Sorry my hand is so sticky," she said. "That cotton candy is hard to eat."

"That's all right," he assured her. The thought occurred to him that he'd be happy to hold her hand even if there was glue all over it.

"This place is so colorful," Luna observed. "Children must love it."

"Well, there are certainly a lot of them around." Colin had an impulse to ask Luna if she wanted children in the future, but held back, concerned that she might think he had another reason for asking. "Harry and Ginny should take James and whatever other children they end up having sometime."

"They'll have to be careful about going to Muggle places," Luna pointed out. "If the others end up like James, they'll be able to do wandless magic. Most kids you can stop from doing magic by taking their wands, but Harry and Ginny won't be able to do that. So, they can't go to places like this unless they can be sure the kids won't do that. They'd be Summoning all kinds of stuff."

"Yes, they would, I hadn't thought of that."

"Ginny was telling me that they're in no hurry to teach James how to Summon things." They turned and walked onto a main thoroughfare, with many shops. Luna looked around, looking closely though a few shop windows. "Do you want to go into one of the shops?" asked Colin.

"No, that's all right, I'm just looking," she said. "It does seem that one of the main points of this place is that you should buy many things."

He chuckled. "Yes, it does seem that way. Oh, look, that's a nice horse." He pointed to a brown and white horse pulling an open-air streetcar.

"Yes, it is nice. I like horses, I've always wanted to try to ride one." They walked on, and she again looked closely at the shop on the left. "Oh! Oh, those are so cute!" She pulled him into the store and picked up a round hat with large black mouse ears. She put it on, and turned to Colin. "What do you think?"

He smiled. "It's very you."

Over the next eight hours, they had a very full day. They watched a parade, talked, shopped, ate in restaurants twice, and went on a few of the attractions that didn't have so many people waiting in line. Colin had brought his camera, and took many pictures, including one of Luna with one of the park's employees dressed up in a character costume. "This one can be titled 'Goofy with Goofy,'" she had joked. They had also asked passersby to take their picture together a few times.

Colin looked at his watch as they sat on a bench. "Wow, it's past two o'clock in the morning in England," he said. "We're not going to get much sleep if we don't go home soon."

She shrugged. "I'm not tired, though. My feet are, but I'm not."

"Yeah, I know what you mean about the feet. I feel like you could walk around this place for three days and not cover everything. Still... well, what do you want to do?"

"Something fun," she suggested, smiling at making him be the one to decide.

"Oh, okay," he replied facetiously. Then, after a moment, he had an idea. "Okay, let's go to my apartment. I want to show you a movie, one of my all-time favorites. It's a funny movie, you'll like it."

"Okay," she agreed. They found a spot out of sight—very difficult, in the sort of place they were in—and Disappeared.

In his apartment, he loaded the movie he wanted into his DVD player, and they spent the next hour and a half silently

watching, and often laughing. After it was over, he said, "Well, I guess you liked it."

"It was very funny," she agreed. "I loved how the blind man told him that the money really belonged to the monkey, and he was only playing the music. He talks so funny, even if what he's saying isn't that funny, it's still funny because of how he says it."

"Yes, exactly," agreed Colin, pleased that she had liked it. "I must've watched all of these movies about ten times, I love them."

"These? They made more than one like this, with that character?"

"Yes, there were five, but only three were really good, I think."

"Oh, let's watch another one."

He raised his eyebrows. "It's four in the morning." He knew he was in trouble sleep-wise as it was, but if they watched another one, he'd get no sleep at all.

"We can watch another one," she said. She made a decision; it struck her as odd how easily she made it. She didn't want the day to be over, and it didn't have to be. "It'll be all right." She could see that he wanted to, but was worried about being tired at work the next day, which was a Monday. She gave him an earnest look. "Colin. Do you trust me?"

Struck by the directness of the question, he found he didn't have to think too hard. "Yes."

She took his hand. "Okay, then. Put another one in. I promise it'll be all right, you'll be okay at work."

Colin didn't see how that was going to happen, but at that moment, he didn't care. He agreed, and put another one in. They resumed their places on the sofa, his arm around her most of the time. They watched, and laughed some more. When it was over, it was nearly six o'clock in the morning; he wondered if she would suggest yet another one. He was getting tired, but it was obviously too late to go to bed.

"Okay," she said. She was more serious than usual; he wondered if it was because she was tired. "I said it would be okay for your work, and it will be. But before I tell you how that is, there's something else I have to tell you. It's very important."

Colin nodded earnestly. Did she have some unusual magical artifact? "I understand. What is it?"

"Before I tell you, I have to leave the room for a minute. I'll be right back." She went to the bathroom and closed the door. Colin was wondering what was going on when the female phoenix he'd seen recently appeared in front of him, and flew down to the floor.

"Hello," said Colin, surprised to see her in his apartment. "If you're looking for Luna, she's in the bathroom, but she'll be right back."

To Colin's shock, the phoenix started to change its shape; the change reminded him of how Professor McGonagall had changed from a cat to her human self a few times in Transfiguration. When the phoenix stopped changing shape... it was Luna.

Colin's mouth hung open in shock; he was flabbergasted. He tried to speak, but found it hard to say anything at first. Finally, he managed, "Harry..."

She smiled. "No, Luna, actually." After another few seconds, she had mercy on him. "But I know what you mean. Yes, I can do what Harry does. Be a phoenix, do all that unusual magical stuff."

He continued to struggle for coherence. "How?"

She nodded. "It's a good question. I can't say I'm totally sure. I'm sure it's partly because I can reach the spiritual realm fairly easily, but it's not only that, because others can do that but can't do this. I think an important part of it is, as Harry said at the time, just *knowing*, knowing that you can do it. At some point, knowing what I did about Harry, I just knew that I could do this. I think a lot of it has to do with my personality. I'm... more ready to believe unusual things than most people, I'm more open to things. Being open to things is exactly what's necessary to be able to do this; that, and a connection to the spiritual realm. Beyond that, there may be other things, but it's hard to say."

He had recovered enough to speak in sentences. "How come you haven't told anyone?"

"I don't want people to know this. You know how it is with Harry, how it was, people asking him to do things, asking why he doesn't. I don't want to have to deal with that."

He nodded slowly; he could understand that. Still... it was incredible... He was able to bring the focus back onto the two of them. "Then, why did you tell me?"

She might have otherwise waited to say what she was going to say until he said it first, but she had taken phoenix-looks at him, which she knew gave her an advantage; she should take some of the pressure off of him. She made eye contact with him, and held it. "Because I love you. And if I love you, you need to know this about me." She knew he loved her as

well; she didn't know if he would say it just then, overwhelmed as he was.

She saw amazement and joy in his eyes. "I love you, too," he said quietly. She moved closer to him; he bent his head down a little, and they kissed. One short one, then a slightly longer one. He moved closer, pulling her into a strong hug. "Now, I don't care if I get any sleep or not," he said, with equal parts emotion and humor.

"You still will," she said, reveling in the feeling. "Did Harry ever tell you about the Time-Turner?"

Colin nodded; his eyes went wide. "You can duplicate the effects of magical artifacts."

She nodded. "We can go to sleep, sleep for as long as we want. Then we wake up, maybe it's Monday afternoon. I can send us back through time to Monday morning. We'll end up going through a certain section of time twice. There's no problem with doing that, as long as the two versions of us don't meet unexpectedly, and as long as we don't change the second time around something we know happened the first time. Since we'll be asleep one of those times, it shouldn't be a problem."

Colin was staring at her, still astonished. Even without taking a phoenix-look at him—she could do it as a human by trying, but as a phoenix, it happened without effort—she had a feeling she knew what he was thinking. "Colin," she said, snapping him out of his train of thought. She took one of his hands and enclosed it with both of hers. "Colin, it's still me. You don't have to look at me any differently, like I'm on some different level or something. I'm still goofy Luna who likes funny hats and doesn't care what people think about her."

He slowly nodded. "I understand. It's just a lot to take in at once. When did it happen? When did you find out?"

They sat on the sofa, and she spent the next half hour telling him what had happened since the day the dragon attacked Diagon Alley, including James' near-death, and why she strove to avoid using her power to change things, even terrible things. "So, the First showed me how Harry suffered on nine-eleven as a kind of a warning," she concluded. "He knew I would be able to do this, and he wanted me to understand the dangers. But there's no rule; it just has to be what we can deal with. I don't know for sure, but I think Harry will continue to do that sort of thing. It's just who he is, and he'll probably continue to suffer for it. But I've already suffered enough to know that I can't do that. I could probably, if I used all my powers, figure out who's been doing all this stuff recently, and stop them. But I won't. If this is still happening when Harry comes back, then he probably will. Maybe it's selfish, but I just can't deal with it."

He pulled her closer to him, and held her. "I can understand that. I don't think it's selfish. I think the First was right, there's no right or wrong to this. It's funny, I envied Harry's ability when I first found out about it, but after hearing this, I kind of feel sorry for him, and you."

"It does have its advantages," she said, with a small smile. "Being a phoenix is really great, and I can stay up all night having fun if I want to, and still get enough sleep. Until now, I just didn't have anyone to have fun with." She leaned over to kiss him; he eagerly returned it.

"I'm very glad to be that person," he said fervently. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, we're probably both going to be tired soon, so we have to think about where we're going to sleep. It can't be here, since we're here right now, and it would overlap. Also, it can't be anyplace we could be found, or interrupted. I was thinking, that place in America that we were at, I saw that they have their own hotel. We could just stay there."

"That sounds good," he agreed. "But before, you talked about where 'we' were going to sleep. Did you mean..." He trailed off, embarrassed.

She tried not to smile at his discomfort. "Well, that's what people in love do. Besides..." Now, she did smile. "It's something I've always wanted to do, but never done."

He laughed, then she did as well. He couldn't imagine that there was anyone in the world luckier than he was right then.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 14: Facing an election he seems to have no hope of winning, Arthur fails in his efforts to prevent, then stop, a Muggle war precipitated by wizards; faced with a last-minute setback, Trent pulls out all the stops to defeat Arthur by a decisive margin.

From Chapter 14: Snape was reading the evening Prophet as Dentus walked in. Snape nodded in greeting. "I suppose I do not need to tell you where this came from."

Dentus nodded. "Trent himself. The man's a real piece of work."

"One thing can be said for him: he is single-minded in the pursuit of his objectives," observed Snape dryly. "Will this have the effect that Trent obviously believes it will have?"

Sadly, Dentus nodded again. "Yes, it will. Arthur is through. He wasn't going to win anyway, but he can't come back from this."

14. Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

Colin walked into the Muggle Liaison office one hour later, though his body had aged fifteen hours. "Good morning, Dudley," he said cheerily.

Dudley looked up in surprise. "I don't see what's so good about it. But you seem awfully happy."

Colin sat at his desk and started his computer. "Yes, I am. Very happy. But I have a feeling you're not going to want to hear about it."

Dudley shrugged. "Then you're probably right. But give me a hint."

"Luna."

"That was a very big hint. So, you two are... together now."

Smiling, Colin nodded. "In every way."

Dudley sighed and rolled his eyes. "And already, we're in 'more than I need to know' territory. Congratulations; I'm happy for you. Now, let us speak of it no more, and I do mean that. Unfortunately, I have news that's going to bring you down an bit."

Colin's browser was set to open to the homepage of America's most important newspaper; the headline was, 'Iran Invades Iraq', followed by the sub-headline, 'Ayatollah Calls On Iraqi People To Resist Infidels.' "Yeah, I see it. Doesn't look good."

"You on the Times?"

"Yeah."

"Fifth article down is about the Brits. Read that." Colin read, his eyes widening with surprise. He hadn't thought of that. He started to read, covering all of the war-related news. He didn't have time to read everything, so he missed the article buried in the International section, 'N. Korea Announces Surprise Military Exercises,' and the article in the National section, 'Vice-President's Youngest Son Killed In Auto Accident.'

Two hours later, they were as fully informed as they were going to get for the time being. Arthur was at Harry's home for a short rest between campaign events, so they went to brief him. Dentus and Luna were present as well; Colin gave Luna a smile, but tried not to be too distracted by her presence. Arthur was discouraged at the news, but not surprised.

"The most interesting thing about it," concluded Dudley, "and the thing we didn't expect, was that Iran is treating Britain differently. They're mainly attacking in the north, where the Americans are. For now, they're not attacking anywhere the Brits are. The Ayatollah has said he has no quarrel with the Brits, and doesn't want a war with them. He says if the Brits will leave Iraq, Iran won't attack them while they're leaving."

Arthur, too, was surprised. "Fascinating. He's trying to separate the Brits from the Americans, and Barclay is so angry at the Americans that it just might work."

Colin nodded. "It's a very clever move, politically. He must know British public opinion is against any more war, and Britain had nothing to do with what happened recently."

Dudley and I popped out into Muggle London for a while and pretended to be reporters, asking people their opinion. We couldn't find anyone who thought Britain should stay. There's going to be huge pressure on Barclay to get out while he can. Iran is limiting its military options by not attacking in the south, so the offer won't be good forever."

Arthur shook his head sadly. "And if the Brits do leave, the Americans are in a very bad way. I'm tempted to say they deserve it, but the only one who really deserves it is their president, who won't suffer for it. The American troops don't deserve it. But, it's often others who suffer for our mistakes. I assume the Americans are bombing?"

"Oh, yes, as much as they can. The newspaper analysts think that America is going to fight more defensively, try to avoid casualties as much as possible, and just, as one guy on CNN put it, 'bomb Iran back to the Stone Age.'"

"International reaction?"

"Strongly anti-American. Iran may have invaded, but other countries are seeing Israel's bombing as the real provocation. Most countries are calling on America to stop the bombing, and Iran to stop its attack, but everyone knows that isn't going to happen anytime soon. There's not much to do now but watch, and see what happens."

Arthur's eyes reflected his pain at the prospect. "Okay, thanks, boys. Keep me informed if anything new happens."

Back at the office, Colin picked up one of the office's copies of the Prophet; to his surprise, it had an article at the bottom of the front page about Iran's invasion of Iraq, and it prominently mentioned that Arthur had worried that wizards had provoked the war, and that he had tried to stop it. He

wondered if Arthur would get any credit among the wizarding public for his efforts.

The Choosing was only three days away, and Arthur's support had crept up to 34%; much better than the 26% reported in the last poll, but still nowhere near good enough. Most of the new support came from undecideds making their decisions, not people formerly supporting Trent but changing their minds. The goblin line on Arthur was up to thirty-eight, suggesting that the goblins thought that Arthur's energy-of-love support would net him an extra four percent.

A debate had finally been arranged; it would take place in Diagon Alley, in the largest open area, on Monday night. The terms had been decided by the Prophet, and agreed to by the candidates, over the past few days. The debate would be ninety minutes long, with no panel or moderator; the candidates would ask each other questions. The only restriction on the length of the answers would be one timekeeper, who would keep track of how long each candidate spoke; the total time each had spoken would be continuously displayed. If one candidate's total speaking time at any point exceeded the other's by five minutes, that candidate would be Silenced, and the other would be free to speak until the difference was only two minutes. Being publicly Silenced would not look good, so Arthur intended to keep a close eye on the time; he suspected Trent would as well.

A crowd started gathering at six o'clock, and by seven o'clock, more than two thousand people were crowded into the section of Diagon Alley in which the candidates would speak. A stage had been set up, with podiums and magical microphones for both candidates. At seven o'clock exactly, both candidates walked out, shook hands, and went to their

podiums. Trent spoke first. "Good evening, and thank you all for coming out tonight. It clearly shows the great interest people take in our public affairs, and it is most heartening. Before we begin, however, there is something I would like to do."

One of Trent's aides walked onto the stage carrying a serving tray on which there was a tall glass of what appeared to be water. Trent took the glass, drank half of it, and placed the other half on a stool he Summoned from his side of the stage. "What I just drank, ladies and gentlemen, is Veritaserum. I challenged Undersecretary Weasley to a debate in which we both would drink it; he refused. It is still my prerogative, however, to drink what I wish, and so I have. If he wishes to drink the other half of the glass, he may do so. If not, I think we will all understand the reason."

Initially furious, Arthur calmed down quickly; partly because displaying temper would hurt him and help Trent, and partly because of Fawkes, who was perched on a street lamp about twenty feet away. He felt Fawkes' calming presence, and as Trent finished speaking, was forming a response. He did not, however, have a chance to make it.

The glass flew off the stool and was caught by Severus Snape, who walked in front of the stage as he Summoned it, careful not to let any spill. In one smooth motion, he caught the glass and drank its contents quickly. The crowd started murmuring; Trent looked outraged. "How dare you—"

Snape, without a magical microphone, had to shout to be heard. "This is not Veritaserum!" he shouted; his voice carried well enough for all to hear. "That is obvious, because if it were, what I said would be a lie, and I would not be able to say it. The fact that I can say it means it is true. Undersecretary Trent clearly intended to embarrass

Undersecretary Weasley if he refused to drink it, and if Weasley did drink it, he would no doubt be asked some embarrassing questions which Undersecretary Weasley, thinking he was under the influence of Veritaserum, would feel compelled to answer. What Trent clearly does not understand is that Weasley would have told the truth anyway. Not being an adept politician, he is not good at lying." A chuckle ran through the crowd. "Trent thinks the only way to get the truth from someone is to make them drink Veritaserum, because it would be true for him. He cannot imagine someone speaking honestly for the sake of it."

"That *is* Veritaserum!" shouted a fuming Trent. "Snape is a Potions master, he has obviously developed a counter-agent for it!"

Snape turned to Trent, careful to still speak loudly so as to be heard. "And you think I just happened to be carrying it, on the chance that you would make such a challenge? You give me too much credit for resourcefulness."

This got another chuckle. "You are a Legilimens! You could have accosted one of my aides, and stolen the memory!"

"I see. So, you have been planning this trick for some time, have you? Would you care to tell us exactly who knew of it, and when?"

Trent looked around. "Aurors! Take this man away! He is a murderer!"

No Aurors moved. "You do not command the Aurors," sneered Snape. "And yes, I *was* a murderer. I was a spy in the service of Voldemort, and when one purports to serve Voldemort, one must murder. Minister Bright understood this, and pardoned me for all that I did. Since Harry Potter

undid what was done to me by Voldemort, I have harmed no one." Turning to stare at Trent, he menacingly added, "Even those who deserve it. You have repeatedly accused me of crimes I did not commit, to serve your political agenda, so I take special pleasure in revealing this shameful deceit. But I did not do it for that reason alone. I did it... because it was the right thing to do." He added emphasis to the last five words, words that had been the cornerstone of Arthur's campaign.

There was scattered applause; as Snape strode away, neither candidate spoke immediately. The timekeeper spoke up. "Undersecretary Weasley, since Professor Snape seemed to be speaking on your behalf, the time he took will be charged to you."

A small smile crossed Arthur's face. "I think it was more on his own behalf than mine, but I accept that with no protest. I will just add to that, to say that I don't know whether that was Veritaserum or not, but it doesn't matter; I wouldn't have taken it anyway, for reasons I've already made clear. I very much do not want to live in a society where someone can dare another to take Veritaserum, and assume from a lack of compliance that the person must want to lie. That is bullying and intimidation, pure and simple, and I will not countenance it. Make no mistake, what Undersecretary Trent did just now is symbolic of the society he will shape if he becomes Minister. Ask yourself if you really want to live in that society."

Three hours later, Ginny sat with Snape on a beach in Hawaii. "That was very impressive," she said, grinning. "Tell me, Severus, is there a counter-agent for Veritaserum?"

She saw again the smugness she had seen earlier. "No."

"So you did know he was going to do that. How?"

"I have had a few of Trent's aides under surveillance. He thinks I stole memories, but it was hardly necessary. People talk far too much, including his people."

"Have you been giving Archibald information?" He gave her a look, which she interpreted correctly. "Don't worry, I don't plan to tell Dad. I know he wouldn't want it done. I think you know I have fewer scruples than him, or Harry." She smiled as Snape nodded approvingly, but added, "That's why I know I'm never getting a phoenix."

He raised an eyebrow. "Does that bother you?"

"No, it really doesn't. Harry is one, and even if he can't bond with me, that's good enough. Not everybody is cut out for one, it's too much to really expect."

"Or to hope for?"

She met his eyes. "Honestly, I don't think I've ever hoped for one. I know you said that because of what I said, but I suppose everyone thinks about it when someone close to them gets one. Dad is now the fourth person close to me to get one, and it's bound to happen to Neville sometime. I was just thinking out loud. Anyway, about Archibald?"

"Yes, I have given him information I thought might be of use to him. It has probably not done a great deal of good, though it might have prevented difficulties that would have otherwise occurred."

"Well, I'm glad you did. Did you stay for the debate? I didn't see you later."

"No, I decided I did not wish to be accosted, which I felt was reasonably likely after my performance. I will retreat back into my usual silence."

"I have to admit, I was surprised you did that. It's not like you to talk about that sort of thing publicly."

He nodded his acknowledgment. "I was addressing his comment, but I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to publicly refute his continuing slanders. The Severus Snape before December 1997 was very different from the one after that time, but he willfully ignored that, as he does anything that does not suit his purposes. That is one thing I have always found disgusting about politics: partly that politicians—witness the recent actions of the Muggle American president—ignore realities that do not suit them, and commonly misrepresent the truth, but mostly, that such things are considered routine and expected, and politicians go unpunished for them. That is the people's fault, of course, for not pointing out what is obvious. So I suppose you could also say that in doing what I did, I was doing my civic duty."

She smiled. "If only everyone did that, Trent might not be Chosen. Anyway, you missed a good debate. Dad did quite well, at least I thought. Do you think what happened at the beginning will help him?"

"I am not a political expert, but the news that Fawkes joined your father will also be in tomorrow's Prophet. Between that and the debate, I would be rather surprised if he did not gain ground. However, I would advise you to not to get your —"

"Hopes up, I know. Don't worry, they aren't. There's still a few days left, and who knows what Trent has left up his sleeve."

Trent and his aides were in his office. "How much is that going to cost me?"

His aides had talked to many citizens after the debate, getting impressions. "About five points is our best guess," said one. "Maybe as much as seven or eight in the short term, but come Choosing day, some of them will come back."

Trent cursed. "We have to assume they won't come back. If they don't, you have Weasley going into the low forties. With the extra points he gets from the love magic people, that's the mid-forties. That is unacceptably close."

"Roger, we're not going to lose this," his senior aide assured him. "That's a worst-case scenario, and that considers his being chosen by the phoenix."

Trent glared. "You seem to be forgetting that when this started, we were looking at a forty-point blowout. Now, it could get as low as a ten-point margin! How am I going to get any respect if I can only beat Arthur Weasley, a nobody, by ten points?"

"You'll be the Minister," pointed out another. "You'll be respected."

The senior aide cut in before an angry Trent could respond. "I think the Undersecretary means that he won't be feared, which would lead to him not getting the respect he should get. Do you have any ideas, Roger?"

"Only one, something I've had in mind for a while. I was hoping it wouldn't be necessary, but now it is. We need to put out something about me."

The aides were confused, except for the senior one. "You mean, we put it out in such a way that it looks like it came from their camp, we cry about their dirty tactics, and he loses support. Not a bad idea. But what exactly are we going to put out there?"

Trent's expression was unreadable. "My son."

Even the senior aide was surprised. "*We're* going to put it out there that Paul is gay? That could break up his marriage, and what's Anne going to say?"

"His marriage is a lie. Judy would thank me in the long run; she's still young enough to find someone. As for Anne, she won't know that we did it. She won't be happy, but it's not as though no one knew anyway."

The senior aide thought it over. Trent was glossing over the pain it would cause his family, which Trent tended to do. He had known Trent long enough to know not to make arguments based on morality, only about politics. And the politics of this were excellent; what made it so personally damaging was exactly what gave it such a strong upside potential. Trent's family would suffer, causing many to think it was a very low blow from the Weasley side. "A phoenix just joined Weasley," he pointed out. "We can't say Weasley personally had anything to do with it, people just wouldn't buy it. It came from his camp, without his knowledge. It still works."

"We can suggest it came from Hogwarts," agreed Trent. "Either Snape or Granger has reason enough. Or, we don't say where we think it came from at all, and let people draw their own conclusions. A lot will point the finger at Weasley without any help from us."

"We only have three days left," said the aide, "so if we do this, we have to do it fast. We should be aiming for tomorrow's evening Prophet. Tomorrow night, we express our outrage, et cetera, which is Wednesday's lead story. Unless something very unexpected happens, it'll still be the main story by Thursday, when the Choosing is held. So, what are tomorrow's talking points?"

"Love magic," responded Trent. "From now until the Choosing, we focus on the likelihood that Weasley picks up an extra four or five points—we'll say it's five to ten, no one can prove us wrong—and talk about how unfair that is. Make it an us versus them thing, get our people worked up about the idea that more people could Choose me but I could still lose. Motivate people to get out there on Thursday, and whatever margin we win by, we suggest that it was really ten points more than that—"

In the living room of her home, Anne Trent tapped the picture frame with her wand; it went silent. Knowing her husband could Apparate home at any time, she had to go someplace private. She went to the bathroom, locked the door, turned on the tap and let it run, and started to cry.

Bob Rogers sat at his desk, thinking. His country was at war, a war that could have easily been avoided. Technically, his country had been attacked, but he knew the President had sought this war.

He wondered about his own responsibility. He had done as the mysterious man had asked, and advocated treating Iran harshly. Would this not have happened if I hadn't done that? If I had tried to hold him back, could I have succeeded? Of course, Jenny and the kids might well be dead, and me, under criminal investigation. Rogers knew, of course, about the accident that had killed the vice-president's son; he

suspected that it was no accident. If so, the V.P. was being controlled the same way as he was. But there was no reason to bother to control the V.P., unless...

Rogers' assistant briskly walked into his office. "Mr. Secretary, it's Prime Minister Barclay, for you."

Rogers' eyebrows rose into his hair. "For me?"

"Yes, sir." He silently dismissed her, and quickly called Davidson. "Barclay is on the line for me. I want you listening." Rogers switched lines. "Mr. Prime Minister! I'm very surprised to hear from you. You know the President has been trying to get you all day—"

"I know that," said Barclay coldly. "I want to speak with someone whose words I will trust."

Rogers was taken aback; Barclay was usually quite polite. He must really be pissed, Rogers thought. "Yes, sir, but you really should speak with the President—"

"I speak with you, or no one at all. It is your choice."

Rogers had expected that, but had felt duty-bound to try at least once. "Yes, sir." He said nothing further, waiting for Barclay to say what he had to say.

"You should understand my position, first of all," said Barclay. "I had a verbal assurance from the President that he would take no action against Iraq without consulting me first. It did not occur to me that I needed to include action by others that was approved by him. I hope he will not attempt to insult me by suggesting he did not know about, or did not approve, Israel's strike. I strongly suspect that he in fact requested it. In any case, he has placed me in an impossible position. Were it not for the value I place on our

countries' relationship, I would make this betrayal public. I may yet, if I judge it necessary."

"I understand, sir."

There was a grim smile in Barclay's tone. "I know you cannot say anything which would suggest disloyalty to your president, and I respect that. This call is simply to let you know where things stand. You know there is intense political pressure on me to accept the Iranians' offer and remove our troops; I am advised that my government will fall if I do not, and the next government surely would remove the troops. It is therefore not a question of if, but of when. Out of respect for your country's people and troops, I intend to delay my decision for as long as possible; the Iranians have quietly informed us that we have no more than a week to decide." Barclay paused, then added, "Our countries are allies, Mr. Secretary. I no longer consider this particular president to be my ally, and will treat him with the mistrust he has earned. I or Sir Philip will call you if I have more to communicate."

"I understand, sir," said Rogers. The line went dead.

In less than a minute, Davidson was in Rogers' office, eyes wide. "The President told him he wouldn't bomb Iran? Did you know that?"

"Of course not. It was a stupid thing to say, I have no idea why he did. Well, we're up a goddamn creek now." He sighed. "Time to see the President. This'll be fun."

The next evening, Dentus Apparated to the Hogwarts gate, and walked through. He preferred not to take the time to travel there, but it would look too suspicious to the others if Snape were to frequently Apparate to Harry's home. He made his way through the castle to Snape's office.

Snape was reading the evening Prophet as Dentus walked in. Snape nodded in greeting. "I suppose I do not need to tell you where this came from."

Dentus nodded. "Trent himself. The man's a real piece of work."

"One thing can be said for him: he is single-minded in the pursuit of his objectives," observed Snape dryly. "Will this have the effect that Trent obviously believes it will have?"

Sadly, Dentus nodded again. "Yes, it will. Arthur is through. He wasn't going to win anyway, but he can't come back from this."

"At such a time as this, it cannot help but occur to me that Voldemort wasted a great deal of time with his efforts to control wizarding society by force. He should have simply attempted to become Minister."

Dentus laughed. "As a former politician, I'd like to think he wouldn't have succeeded. But based on the way Trent behaves, I can see why you would say that."

"You cannot go to the Prophet and suggest that Trent himself did this?"

Dentus shook his head. "Trent is hoping I'll do that; it would just make us look worse. What he did works because of its sheer audacity; very few would believe Trent would do this. Suggesting that he did it would be seen as pouring salt in the wound." There was a silence. "The wizarding world is in for some dark times," said Dentus. "As, unfortunately, is Hogwarts."

Snape stood. "That reminds me, I should discuss these developments with the headmistress." Dentus headed back

to Harry's home, and Snape, to the Great Hall, where Hermione was eating dinner. He pulled her aside and told her about his conversation with Dentus; she assured him that she had been keeping the portraits informed of the situation, and was confident that they would allow the vault to be opened if Trent tried to install a headmaster who was a front for the Ministry. She told him that now that Arthur's defeat was all but certain, she would talk to them again.

Anne Trent's day had been a busy one. She had refused to do her campaign chores, claiming illness, but had managed to go to Gringotts. Scrupulously fair, she only took half of the gold out of his vault. She packed and made other preparations. Earlier in the day, when he had stopped by their home, she had asked him who he thought had released the information about their son, he had said, "Someone in the Weasley campaign, probably Snape. He's a Legilimens, he can find out all kinds of secrets." She had nodded and said nothing more.

He arrived home at ten p.m.; she had a late dinner prepared, for which he thanked her. He had eaten half of his food and drunk half of his wine when she suddenly asked him a question. "Roger. Whose idea was it to tell the press about Paul?"

He looked at her in surprise, and answered quickly. "Mine." He glanced around, startled, as if someone else had said it.

She kept her emotions under control; she had long since cried the worst of them out. "Why? I mean, of course, to win the Choosing, but I mean, why did you disregard the pain it would cause me?"

"I didn't think you would find out."

"I mean, not the pain of knowing you did it, but just from the information coming out."

"That kind of thing doesn't factor into my political decision-making. Besides, you don't like that he's homosexual."

"Not so much that I would ruin him!" She reined in her anger, reminding herself that there was no point to it. "Do you even love Paul?"

"No, I don't. I would love him if he made me proud, but he doesn't."

"Why did you always tell me you did?"

"Because it was what you wanted to hear. It's true both in politics and in daily life: people want to hear what they want to hear, and you get what you want if you tell them that."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, I do."

She sighed unhappily. "Well, that's unfortunate, because I don't love you anymore. If you're wondering why you've answered my questions as you have, it's because there's Veritaserum in your wine. Professor Snape was right about one thing on Monday: that's the only way to get the truth out of you." She felt a little like telling him that she had borrowed an Invisibility Cloak, gone to Hogwarts, and asked Severus Snape for Veritaserum, which he had given her. He hadn't even asked what it was for; she could tell by his eyes that he knew, and that only shamed her more.

She didn't tell her husband that, however, because she felt much more disgusted than vindictive. She just wanted to get out. "I'm leaving, Roger. I'm told that the Veritaserum

will wear off after an hour; it will be safe for you to speak after that. Don't look for me, either for political or personal reasons. I'll contact you if and when I want to, probably through a third party." Having already sent her gold and other possessions ahead, she Disapparated. Her stunned husband sat at the table in a mental fog, waiting for the Veritaserum to wear off.

Arthur awoke very early on Thursday morning, at five-thirty. The Choosing began at six o'clock, and it was tradition that the two contestants were the first two people to participate.

He would go through the day with his head held high, asking for last-minute support, but he knew he would lose. The last poll, taken the day after the revelation about Trent's son, showed Trent gaining support, and leading 63-36. The goblin line on Arthur had been forty-four after the debate; it now stood at forty.

Ginny had gotten up early to make breakfast for him and Molly, since the Hogwarts food wouldn't arrive in time before they left. To their surprise, Ron got up early enough to help, and did. James contributed by randomly changing the color of the food.

Arthur and Molly Apparated to Diagon Alley at ten minutes to six. There was already a good-sized crowd there; Arthur estimated that there were five hundred people. He imagined that the rarity of the event was a big draw. In Diagon Alley's biggest open space, there was a large, tent-like structure, which was clearly where the Choosing would take place. Hanging on the wall near the entrance was a portrait of the Arbiter. It spoke, loudly.

"Your attention, please!" The crowd immediately quieted down. "The Choosing now begins. When you enter, turn to

your left if you wish to Choose Arthur Weasley; turn right if you wish to Choose Roger Trent. Two steps after you turn, you will see an Orb of Choosing. Direct one burst of magical energy into the Orb. Do not pause or waste time; many people must Choose today. After you Choose, continue walking; the path will curve toward the center of the rear of the structure. The two paths meet at the exit, so it will not be apparent to observers which contestant was Chosen by any particular person.

"My portrait will now be hung in the center of the structure, in such a way that I can observe both orbs, and the individuals doing the Choosing. It is a criminal offense to cast any spell other than the one that provides magical energy to the orbs. I will immediately notify the Aurors outside if there are any violations of this regulation. The Choosing will finish in sixteen hours; no person shall enter the structure to Choose after ten o'clock. At that time, the walls of this structure will disappear, revealing the Orbs. I will then announce the winner, who assumes the office of Minister immediately upon my announcement. The result of the Choosing is final, and cannot be appealed or reversed. Do you understand this, Arthur Weasley?"

Arthur nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Do you understand this, Roger Trent?"

"I understand."

"The senior Auror will now move my portrait to the correct position. After he emerges, the two contestants will shake hands, then enter the structure together." Kingsley walked forward, picked up the portrait, and stepped inside. A minute later, he emerged, and gestured to Arthur and Trent.

They grimly shook hands, and walked inside. The Choosing had begun.

Drake had considered some sort of disruption of the Choosing, but decided against it. One reason was that it was being very heavily guarded; twenty alert Aurors were in the area at all times. Another reason was that he was quite curious to see what would happen without disruption. This would be wizarding society's reaction to his actions, and he had set up events so that his victims could redeem themselves by reacting correctly. The American president had reacted selfishly and vengefully, and so his country was in a war it should have avoided. The wizarding society of Britain was faced with a stark choice. Roger Trent symbolized fear; Arthur Weasley symbolized restraint and moderation. Roger Trent told people what they wanted to hear; Arthur Weasley told them what they should know. Drake was sure that if Arthur Weasley had been Minister at the time of the broom battle, his father and brother would still be alive. Choosing Weasley would earn Britain a reprieve from his wrath, because it meant they were choosing more wisely than in the past. Having read the polls in the Prophet, however, he did not expect that they would.

Hermione had canceled classes for the day. Each Head of House, with the assistance of the prefects, took turns transporting groups of students to Diagon Alley by using the Owl Office fireplace, whose owners had agreed to allow it to be used for that purpose for the day.

Choosing went smoothly as the day wore on. The average wait to Choose was thirty minutes; Ministry volunteers did their best to ensure quickness by constantly reminding those in line that they should not approach the structure if they were still undecided, and not to pause while inside.

Those in line chatted about whom they would Choose, and why.

The Daily Prophet had stationed a reporter near the exit, and he was asking every tenth person whom they had Chosen. Other Prophet reporters distributed this information throughout the day. From hour to hour, it varied relatively little: the numbers very nearly mirrored the last Prophet poll. After the first two hours, Arthur's support never fell below 34%, and never exceeded 39%. The numbers of course did not reflect the strength factor, but it was understood that except for the well-known energy-of-love situation, the per-person strength of those doing the Choosing would average out to be nearly equal.

St. Mungo's was having people take a half-hour off in shifts to participate in the Choosing; Pansy got in line at ten a.m. and was joined by Ron and Neville. Ginny came early in the afternoon, holding James; it was James' first time out in public since Harry had been trapped as a phoenix. Ginny knew they might be targets, but was reassured by the presence of twenty Aurors, one of whom had slipped into line right behind her. James attracted a lot of attention, which he seemed happy with, and proceeded to turn a few people various colors, to the delight of the onlookers. Ginny started fielding questions about how James was being taught magic without a wand, and at one point she was so close to being surrounded that the Aurors had to disperse the crowd. Asked if she planned to let James Choose, she joked that he'd probably just turn the Orb orange.

Colin and Dudley came by in the late afternoon, Dudley just to watch the spectacle. Recognizing him from the Prophet, two people humorously offered Dudley their wands so he could Choose. Hermione and Snape Chose with the last group of Hogwarts students, and upon returning to

Hogwarts, she asked to talk to him in his office. "Normally we'd go to the headmaster's office, but..."

"You want to discuss the portraits out of their hearing," Snape surmised.

"I had... a bit of a row with some of them last night," she admitted. "Mostly the older ones. They seem to have this high-and-mighty attitude since they've been there longer. Anyway, some of them were saying that before they'd give their approval to open the vault, they wanted me to show that I'd exhausted every other option, including—you're going to love this—"

"Kissing Trent's feet?" guessed Snape sardonically.

"Not far from it. They want me to 'put aside your pride,' as they put it, and go public with the stuff in the Pensieve. Admit what I did to Skeeter, be contrite, and so forth. Not to curry favor with Trent, they claim, but to get enough public support that Trent would be persuaded to let me stay."

Snape scoffed. "Idiots. I suppose they would have me do the same."

"Your situation didn't come up, but it stands to reason. They also said that if I did it and Trent still didn't back down, then they would support opening the vault; then at least I would have tried everything."

"And they do not realize that there is no chance at all that it would do any good?"

Hermione smiled a little. "Albus and Minerva led the argument against them; Minerva especially had some choice words for them."

Snape chuckled. "I can well imagine."

"Their argument was the same as mine, that Trent is determined, wouldn't listen to public opinion about this, and the principle of my doing it is bad. They were still talking about it when I left last night. Three of them seemed unalterably opposed to opening it unless I accepted their conditions; three others were opposed, but open to argument." Snape could tell from Hermione's tone how much it bothered her.

"If you cannot get ten to agree to open the vault..."

She sighed. "I don't know. One thing I do know though; before I do what they ask, I'll wait the month and a half for Harry to come back. I'll ask the teachers and staff to agree to their salaries being delayed, which I suspect they will, then when he comes back I'll ask him to conjure the money. I know he doesn't like to, but..."

"When he discovers the alternative, I am sure he will not hesitate. You know him more than well enough to know that."

"You're right, of course," she agreed. They were silent for a moment. "Are you going to go to the ceremony where the Arbiter announces the winner tonight?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I see no need to listen to Trent gloat. In addition, it would be easier for him to apprehend me."

She'd forgotten about that aspect of it. "Good point." As soon as the Choosing was over, she thought, they suddenly had to worry about people being arrested for political reasons. What a depressing thought.

At a little past nine o'clock, Luna and her father stood in line. Luna had briefly debated not taking part, since her Choice counting for what she guessed to amount to that of ten normal wizards seemed unfair, and she didn't want to use that power anyway. She was persuaded by her father, who argued that it was her civic duty, and that it wasn't her fault that the Arbiter had founded a system based on strength rather than equal representation. She also didn't mind because she knew Arthur wouldn't win anyway, so if the margin was smaller, that was no problem.

When it was her turn, she walked in and immediately turned left, following an arrow with 'Arthur Weasley' written above it. She saw the Orb, whose light she felt looked adequate but not as bright as she felt it should be. She raised her wand, and just as she readied to send the bolt of energy, an errant thought popped into her head, to the effect that it would be nice if Arthur's Orb were much brighter. Trying to help keep the line moving, she walked on before she saw her contribution reach the Orb.

At ten o'clock, the crowd in Diagon Alley was even larger than it had been for the debate. Aurors couldn't possibly protect everyone, but they did their best, and half were near the structure with the Orbs. Arthur and Molly were there, along with all other Weasleys, including Ginny with James. Trent was also there, but alone; no one wondered why his son wasn't there, but many whispered about his wife's absence.

Kingsley walked inside, then returned in a minute with the Arbiter's portrait, which he again hung near the entrance. "The Choosing is concluded," announced the portrait loudly. "The Aurors will please remove the covering of the structure, so the Orbs can be viewed." The walls and roof amounted to a thick tarp, so two Aurors had no difficulty pulling it down;

the Orbs became visible just as the Arbiter spoke next. "The people have Chosen, as their Minister of Magic... Arthur Weasley."

The crowd gasped as the covering came down, showing that Arthur's Orb was visibly, though not greatly, brighter than Trent's. Every Weasley was astonished, Arthur most of all. Recovering quickly, Molly shrieked with pleasure, and hugged her husband. Dentus, Hermione, Neville, Colin... all who were watching were shocked.

Luna's reaction could be summed up in a single phrase: oh, no. She walked away from where she'd been standing, slightly behind Colin, and went to the nearest spot from which she couldn't be seen. She teleported to her bedroom, went back in time to a minute before she Chose, became a phoenix, and teleported to the inside of the Choosing structure, perching unobtrusively on a beam near the top. She watched herself walk in front of Arthur's Orb, shoot her energy at it, then walk away. Human Luna didn't see the Orb suddenly become substantially brighter, or the shocked reaction of the Arbiter, the only other witness to what had happened.

"What happened?" demanded an incredulous Trent. "This has obviously been fixed! I demand to know what happened!"

"The people have chosen," intoned the Arbiter.

Trent advanced on the portrait menacingly. "That's not good enough! How did this happen?"

"You have no standing to ask questions," replied the Arbiter; the crowd was almost silent, listening. "You accepted the challenge, and have lost."

"Arbiter," said Arthur, turning to him. "Who does have the standing to ask questions?"

"You do, and the senior Auror does."

Arthur nodded. He was still dumbfounded by what had happened, and thought the matter deserved a public airing. "Arbiter, do you know what happened?"

"You have won the Choosing." The Arbiter's face betrayed no hint of humor.

"Let me be more specific. Did more people Choose Undersecretary Trent than Chose me?"

"Yes." Murmuring spread throughout the crowd.

"How many more?"

"I do not count, but my impression was that it was substantially more."

"Why, then, was I Chosen?"

"Those who Chose you were, cumulatively, stronger than those who Chose your opponent."

Arthur tried not to sigh at the obvious truth of the answer.

"You were the only witness to what happened. Can you tell us anything that would shed light on how the result came to be what it is?"

The portrait paused. "No. What happens inside is not to be revealed. No wizard's choice can be revealed, nor can his or her relative strength be related. I have told you all that I can."

"Is there anything that you will not tell us that, if we knew, would help us understand what happened?"

"You know what happened. You have been Chosen."

A small laugh actually went through the crowd; Arthur did sigh. "You know what I mean. I'll try again. Is there anything you will not tell us that, if we knew, would more fully explain why my Orb is brighter in spite of the fact that my opponent received support from more individuals than I did?"

"I will not answer that question."

"That portrait has been tampered with!" screamed Trent.

"How dare you!" retorted the Arbiter. "Every time there has been a Choosing, the losing candidate has made some similar accusation. I suppose it is the nature of people." He raised his voice, speaking to the crowd as well. "I say again, the Choosing is finished, and Arthur Weasley has been Chosen as Minister of Magic."

Arthur decided to have one more try. "Were any laws broken?"

"No."

"Were the Orbs tampered with?"

"No. And I must say that I have never seen anyone so reluctant to accept the job for which he risked everything he owned." This, too, got a small chuckle from the crowd.

"I'm not reluctant," protested Arthur. "You must admit, this is very irregular. The final Prophet exit poll was for Trent, sixty-one to thirty-nine. Kingsley, have your people measured the energy from the Orbs yet?"

"Yes, they have. Fifty-four percent of the total energy from the two orbs went to you." Kingsley stepped towards Arthur, and lowered his voice. "Arthur, the Arbiter is right. Strange or not, you are the Minister now. You'd better start acting like it."

A podium with a magical microphone had been set up, for the winner to give a speech. Arthur approached it uncertainly, never having thought he would have to do so, let alone under such bizarre circumstances. He felt as though he were an impostor, having won under a cloud, under false pretenses. With difficulty, he tried to shake himself out of that frame of mind. He took his place behind the podium; Fawkes flew over and settled on his shoulder.

"Well... I don't think any of us truly knows what happened, but there is really only one thing to think. Clearly, the love magic discovered by Harry Potter, and taught to several hundred wizards to date, is more powerful than was previously thought. So, due to the way the Choosing works, I stand before you as Minister despite having received the support of no more than four in ten of you.

"What that means to me is that I must work even harder to convince the other six of every ten of you that my having been Chosen may have been a quirk of fate, but it was not a mistake. I will be the Minister of all the people, not only those who Chose me. I will act for the benefit of all, not only those who Chose me. And if there are sacrifices to be made, I will ask them of everyone, not only those who did not Choose me." Arthur smiled as some of the crowd laughed. "I may not be a standard politician, but I do understand how such things normally work," he added wryly.

"You're a pretender! A fraud!" screamed Trent, who was immediately approached by two Aurors. Trent went silent;

Arthur couldn't tell whether he had stopped shouting, or whether the Aurors had Silenced him.

"I'm the Minister," responded Arthur calmly, starting to feel like it for the first time. "You heard the Arbiter. Like it or not, peculiar or not, that was the result, that's the law." We're all stuck with it, including me, he almost added, and quickly decided not to. He had to sound like a Minister.

Feeling the calming energy from Fawkes more strongly than at any time since Fawkes had bonded with him, Arthur continued. "The position of Minister is a great responsibility. Dark forces still threaten our society; people continue to die every day. Now, the standard politician's comment about this is to say the Aurors should do better, or that I will support the Aurors in their quest to protect us. Naturally, I will do the latter, but it is not only the Aurors who must assume this burden; it is all of us. So far in this battle, one Dark wizard has been killed, and one captured. Neither was accomplished by Aurors. Lucius Malfoy was killed by a heroic house-elf who gave his life to protect the child of those who employed him. A deadly mercenary who had killed dozens of times was captured by a brave Muggle, Dudley Dursley, who acted on the spur of the moment to protect those around him. Any one of us may find ourselves in such a situation, and we must ask ourselves what we would do. The collective answer to that question will be what determines our fate in the coming days and weeks. I predict that when the ringleader of this terror is finally captured, it will not be an Auror who does it; it will be someone listening to me speak right now. We must support the Aurors, but even more, we must support each other. And, to quote both Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix statue in Hogsmeade Park, we must always choose what is difficult and right over what is easy and wrong. I didn't make many

promises during this campaign, but I did promise to do that, and I will. Thank you all very much, and good night."

Arthur stepped back from the podium as the applause started, and built. Molly stepped up to him, gave him a kiss, and waved at the crowd, nudging him to do the same, which he did. Now, he thought, now comes the hard part.

Ten Hogwarts professors filed into the Golden Dragon, which due to the Choosing had been largely empty but was filling quickly. They were seated at a long table with Hermione at one end and Snape at the other. Hermione felt badly that Hagrid couldn't be there, but he wouldn't fit through the door, and wouldn't have been comfortable in a place like that anyway. Hermione, who drank very rarely, ordered wine, and other teachers made drink orders.

"So, Hermione," asked a pleased Sprout, "is Hogwarts paying for this? Or are you so happy that you decided to blow a third of a month's pay in one night? Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

Hermione smiled. "I'm quoting a certain Hogwarts professor, on the night Arthur decided to challenge Trent: 'If Arthur Weasley is Chosen as Minister, I will buy all of the Hogwarts professors dinner at the Golden Dragon.' Can anyone guess who it was?"

Startled, most teachers turned to look at Snape. "I think, Headmistress, that your inept imitation of my tone rather gave it away," he said dryly.

She laughed. "All right, so mimicry's not my strong point. But thank you."

He shrugged. "I said it with no more expectation of it happening than does one who talks about hell freezing over.

I simply did not want you to be able to remind me of it in the future."

Hermione wasn't sure that she believed him, but decided not to press him. "Well, this is a very good way to celebrate; the occasion is worthy of the place. Hogwarts is safe for another five years, and probably for good, since Trent is gone from the Ministry now. Which is really the icing on the cake."

"I don't know, Hermione," said Dentus. "There'll always be someone like him. Granted, most politicians wouldn't sell out their only son like he did."

"Oh, Archibald," said Flitwick, "Arthur has four Undersecretary slots to fill now. Any idea who he's going to appoint?"

"Looking to move up, are you?" jibed Snape.

"Oh, by all means, you first, Professor," retorted Flitwick. The others laughed.

"Anyone who attempts to get me appointed as an undersecretary will promptly find a rather nasty potion in his or her pumpkin juice," rejoined Snape to more laughter.

"It's funny because it's true," chuckled Dentus. "But no, we haven't discussed it, for the same reasons no one talks about what kind of ice sculptures they're going to make in hell. And by the way, it's five slots; you're forgetting about Trent, who's no longer an undersecretary."

"Knowing Arthur, his first appointment will be Remus Lupin," said Snape sourly. "Just to remind everyone of what a kindly and misunderstood folk werewolves are."

"It wouldn't surprise me," agreed Dentus. "I'll talk to him about it tomorrow, but my first priority will be regarding the open Hogwarts' governors spot."

"Which, I hope, you will encourage him to leave open," urged Snape.

"Exactly. As long as they only have eleven members, they can do nothing. Probably with Trent gone, they'd go back to their old toothless selves, but as far as I'm concerned, they betrayed their trust by trying to bring back Umbridge. I'm hoping I can persuade Arthur that the 'right thing to do' is to make sure the governors remain impotent."

Snape shrugged. "I have potions that can accomplish that."

The teachers again laughed, more than they otherwise would have because of the source of the joke. "You're in quite a good mood," smiled Sprout. "Buying dinner, making jokes... I guess there's nothing like the threat of persecution being lifted to raise your spirits."

"It is, I freely admit, more like Schadenfreude; the man made me his political piñata, and fate has just delivered him a devastating blow in the place where it hurts the most. It is difficult not to be quite pleased. I suspect that even the headmistress, phoenix companion and user of the energy of love though she is, is having a difficult time as well."

Hermione nodded, trying not to smile. "The thought has occurred to me." She looked into her left hand, listened, and smiled. "I'll keep it in mind," she said, and put her hand down. "He says that all the Aurors who aren't on duty are celebrating, and that I should come if I wanted to. I probably won't, though, since tomorrow is a school day. Even this is staying up late, for us."

"It's worth it," said John. "We can sleep in on Saturday morning. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, and we should celebrate."

The waiter brought their drinks. Hermione lifted her wine glass, and looked around the table. "To Arthur Weasley."

"To Arthur Weasley," repeated the others, and they all clinked their glasses with anyone within reach. To Luna Lovegood, thought Snape as he drank, who is doubtless suffering even as we celebrate.

"I shouldn't have participated," moaned Luna, head in her hands. She was at her father's home; Colin was there was well.

"You didn't do anything wrong," argued Colin. "That's the way the system is; it rewards wizards for being powerful—"

"I didn't know I was *that* powerful! If I had, I never would have Chosen! I just single-handedly Chose our next Minister of Magic!"

"At least you Chose well," said her father humorously, even though he knew it wouldn't make her feel any better.

"I overrode the will of the people!"

Her father decided to abandon any further attempts at humor; rarely had he ever seen his daughter so agitated.

"Luna, honey... there's a very large difference between deliberately using your powers to affect the world, and doing so by accident. We do things accidentally all the time; it's very human. You didn't hurt anyone."

Tears were behind her eyes. "Then why do I feel so bad?"

Her father took her hand. "It's hard to know, of course, but I have a guess. I think that you're afraid of something happening to you like what happened to Harry, on nine-eleven, so you're extremely reluctant to do anything that will have any effect, anything you couldn't have done with your normal magic."

She nodded miserably. "That makes sense. At least no one's going to know; thank goodness that there was another plausible explanation for what had happened, and that the Arbiter didn't point a finger at me. I was so afraid he would, I was just wishing Arthur would stop asking questions. I wonder why the Arbiter didn't tell them what happened, anyway."

"There are very specific guidelines about what he can say," said her father. "I think he wanted to protect the integrity of the process, and saying what happened might cast doubt on its validity. Now, that's just a guess. But I do think that he felt that what happened was perfectly legitimate. I mean, if you think that the strongest wizards should have the most influence, then it makes perfect sense that someone who's supremely powerful should have supreme influence. I really think that he thinks that's as it should be."

She sighed. "I can see that. It's still a very strange system, though."

"That may be, but what happened isn't your fault," said Colin earnestly.

She moved closer to him and threw her arms around him. "I suppose it doesn't matter if it's my fault or not, it just is. I'd better get used to it."

An hour later, Arthur and Molly finally got into bed; it was later than usual, and Arthur would have a busy day

tomorrow. Molly took her into his arms. "My brave man," she said, squeezing him.

"Brave? For risking everything we owned?"

She shook her head. "For risking actually becoming Minister. We both know this is the last thing you wanted. You risked it because stopping Trent was important."

He smiled wryly. "Harry owes me for this."

She laughed. "I'm sure that once he comes back, he'll see that you get political support as you need it."

"No, I didn't mean that. I still don't want him getting involved. I know that I need a certain amount of approval to be seen as legitimate, but at the same time, a Minister has all kinds of power that he can use unilaterally; look at all that Fudge did six years ago. I see this as, five years and I'm out." Ministers who won a Choosing could not, by law, be challenged again for five years; this law was so that Ministers could not be constantly challenged by different people. "Most Ministers, if their approval drops too low, have to worry about an insurrection by their undersecretaries." Another way to depose a Minister was by unanimous agreement of the undersecretaries; this was very rare, since Ministers chose undersecretaries, and usually did not become Ministers without their support. "I don't have to worry about that; I could be Minister with a five percent approval rating if I wanted to. Don't worry, I don't want to, but you see my point. I won't involve Harry unless I absolutely have to. I'll do what's right, and my approval rating will take care of itself."

She smiled. "Like I said, my brave man. So, do you think it was the energy of love that put you over?"

"At first I thought so, but some people from the Prophet talked to me and Kingsley a little while ago. They did the arithmetic, based on the Prophet's exit poll being accurate, which they're sure it is. Based on the known number of energy-of-love users and the total proportion of energy in the two orbs, for this result to happen, each energy-of-love user would have to have magical strength equivalent to eleven normal wizards."

Her eyebrows went high. "That seems unlikely."

"Yes, Kingsley and I thought so too. There's going to be a Prophet article about it, of course, and the article will speculate on the possibilities. One is that what I just said is what actually happened; another is that the energy of love affects the orbs in some way we don't understand. A third possibility, one I hadn't considered but starts making more sense the more I think about it, is... another Harry."

"You mean, someone who can do what he does."

Arthur nodded. "If that's the case, whoever it is is keeping very quiet about it. I can understand that; if I could do that, after what happened to Harry, I'm not sure I'd tell the world about it."

"Whoever it is, if it is that, can probably become a phoenix," pointed out Molly. "So, the phoenixes would know. Did you ask Fawkes?"

"I don't think my bonding is far enough along for me to ask and answer questions like that. But I do know that I wouldn't ask anyway. It would be... inappropriate."

"Because that person obviously wants privacy, and you'd be asking Fawkes to violate that privacy," she realized. "I

suppose I can see that. Well, whatever happened, you're the Minister. You just have to get in there, and do what's right."

"And in so doing, I will be politically rewarded," he joked.

"No, probably pilloried. But you're not going to let that stop you."

"No," he agreed, and kissed her. "No, I'm not."

Drake had been dumbfounded at the result of the Choosing, and was hardly reassured to know that Hugo was as well. He wasn't overly bothered, however, partly because of the effects of killing with the ring. He knew he was addicted, but it didn't bother him, because he was keeping track of how many he killed, being careful not to overdo it.

He'd been prepared to let wizarding Britain off the hook if Weasley had won the Choosing, but this was different. Trent had truly been the people's choice, and Weasley only won because of a fluke, and some arcane election laws. If there was a society-wide consensus, it was one that approved of someone who took the measures that Trent would take. He would continue the violence in Britain.

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Next, in Chapter 15: Arthur faces an extralegal challenge to his authority from Trent; Dudley takes urgent action when something he sees on television news hints at wizarding involvement in a Muggle crisis.

From Chapter 15: Dudley was greatly annoyed that he had to drive away, but he wasn't quite ready to blow his cover by using the fireplace at four Privet Drive. His cell phone had never left his hand; he speed-dialed Colin as he drove.

"Colin! Did you see what was just on TV?"

"No, what?"

"Never mind, no time to explain. Meet me at Harry's place, I'll be there in a minute."

He drove for three blocks, and parked in a residential area he knew his parents never drove by. Silently thanking Harry for providing him with an emergency Portkey in both his car and home, Dudley locked the car doors, opened the glove box, grabbed the old, obviously empty pen at the back of the glove box, and disappeared.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen

As planned, Arthur got up early on Friday morning. He knew there were dozens of routine matters that had been waiting since Bright was incapacitated three weeks ago, but Arthur had one priority: a meeting with Kenneth Barclay. He asked Kingsley to set it up as soon as possible, and get back to him. To Arthur's surprise, Kingsley reported that Barclay would see them at eight-thirty.

Arthur wanted Kingsley along, and two 'staff,' he had told Kingsley to tell Barclay. Kingsley set up a Portkey, and they all took it from the Muggle Liaison office to a meeting room at 10 Downing Street. "Mr. Barclay," Arthur greeted him. "You know Kingsley, of course, and I'd like to introduce my assistants for dealing with Muggle affairs, Colin Creevey and Dudley Dursley."

Suitably impressed, both shook hands with Barclay, who greeted them politely. "My impression is that you are both quite young, but after meeting Professor Potter five years ago, I am used to the idea that in your world, young people occupy responsible positions."

"Well, it's not my world exactly," clarified Dudley as Barclay gestured them to sit. "I'm what they call a Muggle too; Arthur just wanted one working in Muggle relations. I knew about wizards anyway because I'm Harry's cousin." Dudley decided not to add that in the wizarding world, working in the Muggle Liaison office wasn't really considered a responsible position.

"I see. So he is still a phoenix?" Arthur briefly explained what had happened with Harry recently; Barclay shook his head in wonder. "I say, you people have the most interesting problems. Unfortunately, it is our problems that we must discuss. I have three days before I must make a final decision as to whether to withdraw British troops from Iraq. Or, I should say, to act on my decision. I have not told the Americans, because at this time I do not trust their leadership, but barring any highly unusual developments I will be withdrawing our troops. We did not ask for this war, and our people do not want it. Of course, the ideal course would be to stop this war now. Now that you are Minister, and congratulations on that, do you have more authority than before to act?"

"I have authority to act in Britain," Arthur said unhappily, "which does us little good at the moment. As you know, we've already done some unauthorized investigating in America, drawing the ire of our counterparts over there. But since they seem disinclined to act, I'll do it again if I think it'll be useful. What you can do to help is to let us know if you see or hear of anything that seems like it might have had anything to do with magic. We need a lead, and we don't have any right now."

Barclay nodded solemnly. "Of course. In addition, I will tell my intelligence leaders to be on the lookout for... events that cannot be easily explained. One advantage of being Prime Minister is that I need not explain my directives."

Arthur smiled. "I suppose not. Well, it's good to know that at least our governments are on the same page about this. All we need to do now is convince the rest of the world."

"Or at least the Americans, which should be the most difficult bit," said Barclay with sad humor. "No progress on

that front, I take it?"

"I'm seeing my counterpart, the American Secretary of Magic, as soon as possible today, and I'm going to put forward the need for action as aggressively as I can," Arthur assured Barclay. "I have no idea what progress I may make, but I'm not optimistic."

"I hope you have better fortune than I did with their President," said Barclay. "Anything that is done to stop the war will probably have to be done over his objections. I believe he actively desired this conflict, which is why I am willing to remove our troops despite the precarious situation in which it will leave their troops. That, and the fact that I will be summarily removed from this office if I do not do so," he added with a self-deprecating shrug, humorously admitting his main motivation.

"Of course, we do have to listen to our constituents," agreed Arthur. The thought immediately occurred to him that he personally did not have to; he would be Minister for five years no matter what. He would listen, and do what they wanted when it seemed like the right thing to do.

Arthur returned to the Ministry to find Dentus waiting for him in the Minister's office; it would be difficult for him to think of it as his own. Amelia had agreed to stay on at Hogwarts another day while Dentus helped Arthur get started. Dentus, however, had bad news.

"Well, Arthur, there's been the first challenge to your authority. A little over half the Ministry called in sick this morning."

Arthur sighed. "Trent?"

"Yes, of course. It seems he's been trying to arrange this since last night; I've talked to a few people he tried to recruit and didn't do it. He's trying to convince people that what happened amounted to an illegal coup, and it's just a matter of time before he gets to the bottom of it. How you or the Aurors hoodwinked or manipulated the Arbiter, and fixed the Orbs. In the meantime, he expects those loyal to him—who, of course, will be rewarded when he get his rightful Ministership—to openly take his side, or at the very least, passively resist by calling in sick."

This is not good, thought Arthur. What makes it almost worse is that it isn't as though Trent doesn't have a point. I know the law is on my side, but what happened is still unexplained, and it smells very fishy. "Should I take this as a bad sign, or as a good sign that it was only as much as it was?"

"It's possible to see it either way. Of course, this is doomed to fail, if for no other reason than that the Aurors are with you; you have society's muscle behind you. But you should know, Arthur, that the way you're perceived isn't helping you. Apparently Trent's people had to overcome a certain amount of resistance to get this many people to call in sick; people were afraid of losing their jobs. Trent's people were saying, this is Weasley, you don't have to worry about consequences, and that persuaded some people. Calling in sick was like keeping a toe in Trent's camp, keeping their options open. You need to put a stop to it."

Arthur nodded; he could see that it made sense. "What do you suggest?"

Dentus gave him a level stare. "I'd like you to think about this one yourself, Arthur. Tell me what you think you should

do, and I'll advise you. But this is a leadership test, and I want to see what you do with it."

Arthur was mildly annoyed, but he supposed he could see what Dentus meant. He mulled it over for a minute. "Is there any way to persuade people that the Choosing was legitimate? Any evidence we can point to?"

The expression on Dentus's face told Arthur that he hadn't given the answer Dentus had hoped he would. "No."

Dismayed, Arthur thought again. "Well, I can't exactly fire the people who called in sick. That's half the Ministry."

"You couldn't anyway," pointed out Dentus. "You have no proof that they weren't actually sick, and being sick isn't an offense for which one can be fired."

Arthur took another minute. "I suppose I could tell people that they'll be fired if they don't show up for work on Monday. Unless they actually are sick, in which case, they'd have to get a note from St. Mungo's."

"Arthur," said Dentus patiently, "you know very well that one can use magic to give the appearance of sickness. Your sons sell candy that will do it."

"You think I should say that people have to come in, even if they're sick?"

"If you make that exception, at least the same number as today won't come in, maybe more, and St. Mungo's will be packed with people getting notes. I guarantee it. Arthur, I know it's not fair to what few people might actually be sick, but this is important. There's being fair, and there's letting yourself get pushed around. You're legally the Minister, but if Trent has his way, there'll be enormous public pressure on

you to do something outside the law, such as hold another Choosing, or even choose a Minister in some unconventional way. That's his aim, and a non-functioning Ministry would be a powerful argument for him. 'Look how weak Weasley is, he can't even get the Ministry to come into work.' Trent will do anything, *anything*, to find a way to get the results of the Choosing declared void, and himself restored to his former position. If you don't act firmly, you're setting a tone that will haunt you for five years even if Trent fails here."

Dentus saw the unhappiness on Arthur's face. "Arthur, there was a story I was told soon after I joined Hogwarts. When Harry was made the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at the beginning of his sixth year, Draco Malfoy started manipulating younger students, challenging Harry's authority. Did you ever hear about that?"

Arthur nodded. "He threatened Malfoy with detention, which he eventually gave when Malfoy didn't back down. But I can't give Trent detention."

Dentus tried not to roll his eyes. Arthur was a good man; Dentus would have to be patient with his inability to grasp certain things. "The point is that Harry acted firmly, he didn't tolerate what Malfoy was trying to do. He acted with the authority he had. You need to find out exactly what authority you have, then use it. Your first impulse was conciliation, to persuade others of the rightness of your position. That's understandable, but it's Trent you're fighting more than the Ministry people he's manipulating. Taking a firm line with Trent will persuade the Ministry employees a lot better than any verbal persuasion will. People must understand one thing: when the dust settles, you'll still be Minister, and Trent will be out. Perception is extremely important here; what is seen to be the case is what will end up happening. As we speak, Trent is out there doing all he

can to get you removed as Minister, even though there's no legal means for it. I strongly suggest that you find out exactly what Trent is saying and doing, meet with your legal advisers—those that showed up for work today, anyway—and find out what your options are. Having done that, you can decide what action to take."

Somber, Arthur nodded again. Dentus was tempted to take Arthur by the hand and walk him through every step he needed to take, making sure he did it all. But I'm not going to do that, thought Dentus. I've told him what needs to be done, but there are some things a man has to do by himself, decide by himself. If he lets himself get pushed out of this job under these circumstances, then he really shouldn't have it in the first place. Still, Dentus had compassion for Arthur. Arthur hadn't really wanted the job; it was a substantial burden for him. Dentus stood to leave, then paused. "There's a difference, Arthur, between being a strongman and being a strong man." He left, hoping that Arthur would recognize the right thing to do. Once Arthur did, he would surely do it.

Luna had more or less recovered from the angst she'd suffered the previous night, but she still felt the weight of responsibility. The morning Prophet, with its passing suggestion that there was another with Harry's power going unnoticed, hadn't helped. It couldn't be proved, and as long as the Arbiter remained silent, there was no way to link it to her. She tried not to think about it; she would just have to try harder to take no actions with her unusual abilities that would have strong effects on others.

She had decided to go to the Ministry with Colin and Dudley, partly to be around Colin, and partly for her Muggle Liaison article. She knew that the general, behind-the-scenes article she'd planned to write would now become a story of how the

department reacted to effects that wizards had on the Muggle world, and in particular, their response to this war. After lunch, Colin had gone to meet an acquaintance who worked in another department; she talked to Dudley as he checked out the Web, getting details of what had happened in the Muggle Prime Minister's office earlier.

Colin came in, sat near them, and spoke in a low voice. "The guy I told you about, it turns out he wanted to talk to me because he wants to quietly let me know what Trent is doing. Trent basically wants the Ministry to refuse to recognize Arthur as Minister, for them to do nothing Arthur says. He's trying to get the support of the big businesspeople, the very rich, people like that. If Trent gets enough support, he would make up some story about the Choosing being rigged, maybe even make up some evidence for it, and basically declare himself Minister. The idea would be that if enough Ministry employees followed him, he would be the Minister, in fact if not by law. The Aurors wouldn't follow him, at first at least, but his people are saying they eventually would. They'd want Arthur to slink away with his tail between his legs."

Luna frowned. "I'm pretty sure that's illegal. Isn't it illegal to plan to get rid of the Minister in any way not otherwise approved of by law?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Colin. "A challenge from the undersecretaries or a Choosing are the only ways it's allowed. Anyway, he's also whipping up opinion about the energy of love, even more than he was at the end of the campaign. He's saying that the love magic people are trying to take over, and Arthur's challenge was a plot by them to take power, and using the way the Choosing works—and, he claims, manipulation and corruption—never let it go. He's trying to paint it as a revolution against the established

authority, a coup. It reminds me of what Professor Dentus used to say in History of Magic: if you want to gain power, you always have an enemy, an 'other', someone to blame. His is the people who use the energy of love."

"Could he succeed?" asked Dudley.

Colin shook his head. "I don't know, but if I were Arthur, I'd worry. We all know that Trent will do anything to get what he wants. I thought I'd stop in and tell you two first, but I'm heading straight to Arthur. He needs to know this."

In the early afternoon, Rogers met with the President and the other usual foreign-policy principals. He reported that it was highly likely that the Brits would leave Iraq, and it could not even be taken for granted that they would stay for every moment they possibly could. He was alarmed to hear that satellite images were showing that North Korean military exercises were occurring in an unusual pattern, unusual even for surprise exercises. The President asked Rogers for his best guess as to the North Koreans' state of mind; he deferred to Adams, suggesting that North Korea's intentions could be discerned better by objective facts than diplomatic analysis.

Back in his office, his heart was heavy. Would North Korea seriously consider invading the South? Even with America's nuclear deterrent? America had just sent half its troops that were normally stationed in South Korea to the Middle East; could this be some head fake by North Korea designed to get America to pull them back, thus weakening its position in the Middle East? Rogers desperately hoped so, but had a sinking feeling that it was more than that. With America diverted by a war that demanded its total concentration and resources, there would never be a better time for North Korea to attack the South, if it was ever going to. The

question was, if the North attacked the South with conventional weapons, would America respond the only way it could with any effectiveness—with nuclear weapons? They had not been used since World War II, and it would be very difficult to justify their use. Adams had pointed out that if North Korea did attack with conventional weapons, the South's defeat was far from a foregone conclusion, though it was possible.

Rogers wondered for the hundredth time since the war had started four days ago whether he could have made any difference had he done what his conscience told him to do. He'd told himself that he'd had no choice, and it was true, but the number of dead that could possibly be attributed to his actions was already far too high, and could escalate extremely quickly. An idea came to him, one that he'd had many times over the past four days, but shot down as too risky. He started gathering his courage; not doing anything was starting to become terribly, soul-crushingly risky.

It had been a very busy, and very stressful, first day of work for Arthur. Worrying about the Muggle war and the immense responsibilities of his job would have been bad enough, but his main focus had to be on the challenge Trent was mounting. What he wanted to do had conflicted with what he understood he should do.

The door to his office opened; he remembered that he had told his secretary, who had been Bright's secretary before, to have the man come in when he arrived. "Mr. Atkinson," said Arthur, extending a hand. "Good to see you again."

The reporter nodded. "Minister. Excuse me for saying so, but it still sounds odd saying that to you."

"It still sounds odd hearing it," agreed Arthur. "But I'll have to get used to it, and so will Roger Trent."

Arthur gestured Atkinson to a chair, and they both sat. "Does this mean that you've decided to take action against him?"

Arthur nodded grimly. He almost started the next sentence with 'I'd really prefer not to, but...', then decided that he didn't want to sound wishy-washy while he was trying to be firm. "If I'm to follow the law, I really have no choice. It couldn't be clearer that he's trying to engineer the removal of a lawfully Chosen Minister, and that is illegal. Fifteen minutes ago, I ordered the Aurors to arrest him. It should be happening any time now."

Atkinson's eyebrows rose. "Did you consider taking a more tolerant line, in view of the curious circumstances of the Choosing?"

"Of course. I wish it hadn't come to this. I wouldn't have minded if he had protested this, or tried to suggest that we should consider changing the way the Choosing works. That would have been within the law. But he has gone outside the law, and I can't allow that. I'm sure he feels genuinely aggrieved, and for that, I don't blame him. He got the support of sixty percent of the people, and in most systems of choosing leaders, that would be more than enough. But we can't change the law retroactively because we don't like its results, and that's what he's trying to do."

"Will you take any action against his supporters in the Ministry, or against those who called in sick today?"

"Not yet, but I'm issuing a firm warning to them. Anyone who continues what he has done will be joining him in custody. His inner circle, who I understand have been

assisting him, are now being warned by Aurors that continued activity will not be tolerated, and that they must act strictly within the confines of the law. As for those who called in sick, I am announcing now that anyone who calls in sick on Monday will be summarily dismissed. I have already made it known to all in the building, and warning owls will be sent to those who called in sick today."

Again, Atkinson's eyebrows went up. "Being sick is not a sacking offense."

"No, but disobeying a direct order from the Minister is. It is within my authority to do this. I apologize in advance to anyone who happens to be truly sick on Monday, but they must come in. I think that everyone will understand why it must be this way."

"Do you think that in view of what happened yesterday, the way the Choosing works should be changed?"

"I think that would be premature. Choosing based on a wizard's strength may or may not be 'fair,' but it is the way things have been done for five hundred years. Changing the system based on one unusual occurrence would be an overreaction, I feel."

"It may not be only one occurrence," replied Atkinson. "As you may know, Roger Trent has been saying today that this is a coup by those who use love magic, and that as more people use it, those who do not do so risk becoming a permanent underclass, ruled by those who do. What do you say in response to this?"

Arthur repressed a chuckle at the absurdity of the thought. "As someone who does use love magic, I can safely say that those who do have no desire to 'rule' anyone. This was not a 'coup,' since I expected to lose, and was very surprised to

win. I only initiated the challenge because I felt that Roger Trent would have been a harsh and divisive Minister, and I think events have proven me right. As we see right now, he is trying to whip up fear, trying to divide our society. That is not the way to lead. I think we need to remember that what happened this time was unexplained, and that there's no way to know if it would happen again. I tried to find out what had happened, and if I can, I will. But it's far too soon to make dire predictions about the future."

Arthur was very uncomfortable, because he felt in his own heart that he had not been legitimately Chosen, or at least, that the will of the people had not been reflected. But he knew Dentus was right; people were sometimes handed difficult situations, and had to do the best they could. Arthur personally felt that the Choosing needed to be reviewed and perhaps changed, but to say that right then would only give credence to what Trent was saying. He would wait until some time had passed, perhaps a year, then bring it up as a general public policy matter. It couldn't only be about him.

In the offices inhabited by the leading North Korean Dark wizards—no one of them was in charge, they had varying levels of influence—the question was not about whether to attack, or when, but how. One option was a standard conventional attack, by which they hoped to overcome the South's technological advantage by sheer force of numbers. Their Muggle military leaders—the wizards didn't deign to become involved in such details—had gamed it out many times, and victory was highly speculative at best, even though half of the American troops and much of their high-tech weaponry would be gone. Better yet, once the attack happened, additional help from the Americans would not be forthcoming.

The other option was a first strike using its newly manufactured nuclear weapons. One would be aimed at the South's command and control centers in Seoul; two others would target the South's front-line troops near the border. One advantage in taking prompt action was that the winds were blowing towards the south, so the nuclear fallout would fall only on the South, not the North. The wizards didn't care a great deal about damage to the civilian population; the effects had to be considered, but in a purely utilitarian way.

The problem with this approach, of course, was the possibility of an American nuclear response. They had reason to believe that the American wizard's plans would succeed, but they had to plan as though they would not, and that the American response would be an unimpeded one. Magic would allow them to survive the nuclear attack, but the wizarding population would have to be warned, and some might lose their homes. The only serious danger would come from the Americans deciding, in response, to truly blanket the North with a few dozen nuclear missiles, which they considered extremely unlikely; the American response would likely be a proportional one. In addition, unless the American response was extremely fast and accurate, the North's troops would be well into the South by the time the Americans could respond, and the Americans would never fire nuclear weapons onto South Korean territory.

The North Korean wizards did not worry about international response after the invasion was successful; no one would attempt to drive them out, as the Iraqis had been driven out of Kuwait. That would never have happened without Americans propelling the effort, and the Americans had their hands full. The Chinese would not be pleased, but would take no serious action against them; the rest of the world would protest and wail, but do nothing. The Americans

would not be able to lead, and no other country would be willing.

The North Korean wizards decided to wait until there seemed to be a sign that what the American wizard intended was actually happening. As soon as they had it, they would launch the nuclear weapons. They decided on an extra one aimed at South Korea's wizarding population, which lived and worked in the same small area. With any luck, they would be caught napping, and would be sufficiently decimated that they would cause no problem for the new rulers of the entire, united country.

It was four-thirty on the U.S. east coast as Bob Rogers looked at his watch. Unless his nerve failed him, he would very soon do something that would put his career and life at risk, and risk the lives of his family as well. But he couldn't escape his responsibility for what had happened, even though his actions had been coerced. If he had done three weeks ago what he would do now, there would very possibly not be a war taking place. He wanted to call his wife and two grown children to warn them, but he knew he couldn't trust any phone. He would just have to pray that nothing happened to them. He knew what had happened to the Vice-President's son, though, and had no illusions. He was taking a grave risk.

One thing he did not want to risk was the President finding out what was happening any sooner than he had to. Rogers had heard that the President would, as usual, take the presidential helicopter Marine One to Camp David, the Maryland presidential retreat, as he usually did on Friday afternoons. Normally in a time of war, a President would be expected to stay at the White House, but modern communications equipment made that necessity obsolete; the President could be briefed anywhere, with the same

information and level of security present in the White House Situation Room. The President, Rogers knew, also wanted to paint a picture of normalcy. As for Rogers, he wanted to wait for the President to board Marine One before doing what he did; he knew that the first thing that would happen would be a Presidential summons, which he preferred to put off.

A few minutes later, his TV screen finally showed the President walking out to Marine One. Rogers stood, and headed out the front door of the White House; he would find the nearest cluster of cameras. He didn't want to do it in the White House briefing room, as he felt that only words that were officially sanctioned should be said there. Before he left, he'd called a CNN producer on his cell phone, telling him that he'd have something important to say that he wanted to go out live, and asking him to tell the other major media outlets the same thing. He assured the CNN man that he'd get an exclusive later.

Dinner had been two and a half hours ago, and Dudley was feeling that it was time for him to go. His parents had invited him for dinner again even though it had only been a week; obviously they'd been very impressed by his association with a Special Forces captain. All through dinner they'd made little comments clearly showing that they'd like any hints he might be inclined to drop about his work. He hadn't done it, of course, and was starting to wonder if he might have to start begging off dinners if they started doing it too much.

Fortunately, when dinner had finished, that line of conversation had stopped. They'd been watching television for the past few hours, and Dudley had listened to his parents talk about the usual things. As his father was flipping channels during a commercial, he went past the BBC's Channel One; Dudley fleetingly saw a familiar-looking

man in front of a cluster of microphones. "Wait, Dad, go back to Channel One," he said urgently. Surprised, Vernon did so, and Dudley listened carefully.

"My advice to the President over much of the past month has been coerced and flawed," the American Secretary of State was saying. "My life, and my family's life, has been threatened by an individual, perhaps part of an organization, who has demonstrated that he can access any area, no matter the level of security. He demanded that I urge the President in the direction of conflict with Iran, which, fearing for my family's safety, I did. I urge anyone currently near any of my family members to protect them; they may be in grave danger as I speak. This war never should have happened, and was sought by parties who did not have the best interests of the United States at heart."

Dudley's heart was suddenly pounding. Access any area, no matter the level of security... that sounded very much like something a wizard could do, and pushing a war was consistent with the aim of the sarin gas attack. This was enormously important, he had to do something...

"What is it, Dudley?" asked Vernon, mystified by his son's reaction; Petunia was looking at him strangely as well. He was about to answer them when his cell phone rang. Must be Colin, he thought, he's watching this.

He took the phone out of his pocket. "Hello?"

"Mr. Dursley?" The voice sounded very familiar.

"Yes."

"This is Kenneth Barclay speaking."

Dudley knew immediately why he was calling. "Mr. Barclay!" he exclaimed in surprise; his stunned parents gaped at him, wondering if it could possibly be 'that' Barclay.

"Mr. Dursley, if you will turn your nearest television to the BBC news—"

Dudley had never thought he would interrupt the Prime Minister, but he did. "I'm already watching it, sir. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"It would seem so. If what we think is correct, this may be the break we have been looking for."

"Yes, sir, I think so too. But time is critical; we have to do something right now."

"Indeed, I fear that the Secretary could fall victim to foul play at any time. He clearly does not know that his tormentor is likely a wizard. I know the people of the wizarding world are reluctant to act, but something should be done, and very quickly."

"Absolutely, sir. Don't worry, I'll get it going. I'll make sure they know what has to be done. Can you contact Captain Ingersoll? We might need his help."

"I will get in contact with him as soon as possible."

"Thank you, sir. I'll let you know what happens as soon as I know anything."

"Thank you, Mr. Dursley. I look forward to hearing from you." Dudley turned off his phone and snapped it shut, then looked around for his jacket, which he remembered was hanging near the front door. "I'm sorry, I have to go," he said as he stood.

"Dudley! Was that the *Prime Minister*?" asked Petunia, both incredulous and excited. They followed him as he practically ran for the door.

"Yes, which is why I have to go," he replied, throwing his jacket on quickly and opening the door. "Don't tell anyone!" he added over his shoulder as he ran from the porch to his car, parked in the driveway.

Looking at each other in amazement, they watched their son jump into his car and drive away. "How can he expect us not to tell anyone about that?" asked Petunia plaintively. "My friends would just die!"

Dudley was greatly annoyed that he had to drive away, but he wasn't quite ready to blow his cover by using the fireplace at four Privet Drive. His cell phone had never left his hand; he speed-dialed Colin as he drove. "Colin! Did you see what was just on TV?"

"No, what?"

"Never mind, no time to explain. Meet me at Harry's place, I'll be there in a minute."

He drove for three blocks, and parked in a residential area he knew his parents never drove by. Silently thanking Harry for providing him with an emergency Portkey in both his car and home, Dudley locked the car doors, opened the glove box, grabbed the old, obviously empty pen at the back of the glove box, and disappeared.

He found himself sitting on Harry's sofa. Ginny and an obviously recently arrived Colin were there. "Dudley, what's going on?" asked Colin.

"We need a phoenix," said Dudley. "We have to find Arthur, ask him to let us use Fawkes." A second later, the phoenix that Dudley had seen a few times recently suddenly appeared; Dudley glanced at her in surprise. "Well, obviously, it doesn't have to be Fawkes," he amended. "Thanks," he added, to the phoenix. "Could you take us to the Potions dungeon—"

"He won't be there, it's quarter to ten," pointed out Colin. "He'll be in his quarters."

"Okay, take us to his quarters."

"Outside his quarters, or in his quarters?" asked Colin. Ginny was clearly wondering why they needed Snape, but motivated by Dudley's urgency not to ask.

"In his quarters. This can't wait," confirmed Dudley. Colin nodded, they grabbed the phoenix's tail, and were soon face to face with a startled Severus Snape. "This had better be good," he growled as he put down his book and stood.

As quickly as he could, Dudley explained what had happened. Without hesitation, Snape looked at the phoenix. "Please bring the headmistress." The phoenix disappeared, and came back a few seconds later with Hermione, who was in a nightgown, obviously ready for bed. "Headmistress, I need your ring."

She quickly took it off and handed it to him. "What's going on?"

"They can brief you when they brief the Minister, which I assume they will be doing shortly. I must go, quickly." He turned to the phoenix. "You cannot take me where I need to go, but I would like you to take me to Harry's home; I need

to borrow his Invisibility Cloak." She took off, and both were gone.

Hermione looked at Colin and Dudley quizzically. "Who..." Wondering who was bonded to the newest female phoenix, she trailed off as she got the information from Flora. She looked at Colin, eyes wide. "Colin! That's wonderful! Congratulations! When did it happen?"

He smiled. "About four days ago."

Dudley gave a start, remembering what Colin had told him four days ago, that he hadn't particularly wanted to know. "What, did you go around telling everyone about that?"

Colin chuckled. "Different thing. C'mon, let's go see Arthur."

Snape's short trip to America the previous week had taught him a great deal about the geography of the American Muggle power centers; covered by the Invisibility Cloak, he Apparated onto the White House lawn. He walked towards the nearest group of people, who appeared to be reporters, and started scanning memories for the location of the Secretary of State. Discovering that the Secretary had gone back inside, he briskly walked to the lobby, doing quick Legilimency scans as he went.

He soon discovered that Rogers was in a meeting with the Chief of Staff. Casting a spell to make sure no one looked at the door, he opened it, and could hear voices. "For God's sake, Bob, why didn't you go to the President with this?" he heard. "And do you know what you just did to the President out there? Made him look like an idiot who's easily manipulated by his staff, including you! As if this would've happened differently if you'd advised him differently?"

"It might have!" insisted Rogers. "Because he listens to my advice doesn't mean he's being manipulated. Look, I had to do it this way. I couldn't trust that this guy, whoever he is, couldn't hear anything I said, even if it was alone with the President!"

Snape knew that he didn't have time to wait for the conversation to end naturally, and he didn't want to interrupt obviously. He resorted to a spell that James Potter had once used on him successfully in their little war at Hogwarts: he cast a spell on Rogers that caused the sensation associated with an extremely urgent need to urinate. Rogers was immediately in obvious discomfort, but didn't move from his seat as the other man spoke. Annoyed, Snape then cast a Suggestion Charm, which did the trick. "Excuse me," said Rogers abruptly, standing. "I'll be right back." He hurried from the room, Snape quickly following.

Snape followed him into the nearest men's room, which was otherwise unoccupied. Snape took away the two spells he'd just cast, and as Rogers stood alone wondering why he'd been in such a hurry, Snape cast a Confundus Curse, then Legilimens. "Aha," he muttered quietly, finding what he'd expected: a Memory Charm. Using Hermione's ring, he quickly dissolved it, finding evidence of the scans that had been done and covered; he also got an image of the face of the wizard who had manipulated Rogers. As Snape was considering whether to place a new Memory Charm, and what to cover, he didn't see Drake sneak up on him from behind. A Stunning Spell hit Snape, and he collapsed.

"Enervate," said Drake.

Snape's eyes opened, and he looked around. He was on the floor, and standing in front of him was the wizard whose face he had seen in Rogers' memory. Standing two steps behind

the wizard and to his left was Hugo Brantell, with an expression that told Snape volumes. Things began to become very clear to Snape. "And you are?"

"Leonard Drake," came the reply. "Of course, those with whom I share that information either do not leave my service, or do not leave here alive."

"Oh, no," cried Snape, in an openly mocking tone. "Please don't hurt me. I'll do anything you say. Oh, I'm so frightened..."

Surprised, Drake glanced at Hugo, the question in his eyes; Hugo nodded. "It's how he really feels. His attitude is that you don't know what you're up against."

Drake didn't take his eyes off Snape for more than a second, making it clear that he had no intention of letting Snape get away. Snape saw his wand on the floor two meters away, but knew that it was a test, and that he would not try to lunge for it. He would play the game on Drake's terms.

"Is that so," replied Drake calmly. "Well, let's see why." He cast Legilimens; Snape easily kept Drake out of his mind. "You must be joking," countered Snape haughtily. "You know better than to think you can do that."

"We'll see," said Drake. "Crucio." Hugo cringed as Snape screamed, reacting exactly as everyone did to the Curse. After about fifteen seconds, Drake stopped it, then cast Legilimens. His eyebrows went high as he was again shut out. "You shut me out even after just having been Cursed; I'm impressed," admitted Drake. "But you will break eventually. Everyone does. You will be very useful in my service."

Still recovering from the Curse, Snape laughed disdainfully. "I will not be in your service. I will defeat you. If you had a brain in your head, you would kill me now. But you will not; the challenge of breaking me is too much for you to resist."

Drake again briefly glanced at Hugo; again, Hugo nodded confirmation that Snape's outward attitude was the same as his internal one. "You seem to forget that I have a wand, whereas you do not. This may take a while, but I have time."

Snape briefly wondered why Drake didn't just take any information he wanted while he was unconscious, but immediately understood that Drake was far more interested in simply breaking him than in any specific information. As he realized this, Drake cast the Curse again; Snape screamed at the very familiar, though no less unbearable, pain. Memories of what he'd gone through to re-enter Voldemort's service came to him as he screamed, trying to somehow compartmentalize the pain. He knew that most people couldn't even think while under the Curse.

Drake continued it for two minutes, then stopped, leaving Snape gasping for breath on the floor. Snape glanced up at Hugo; he could see the pain in Hugo's eyes, and the sense of helplessness. "Are you familiar with slave conditioning?" asked Drake.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course I am," he spat. "There is no Dark magic with which I am not familiar. I assume you did that to Malfoy, but that would have been no great challenge. I do not think you have had enough time to do it to Brantell here. And you will never do it to me."

Drake looked amused. "And why do you think that?"

"Such a *shady* character as yourself can never hope to accomplish anything great," said Snape, his eyes flicking to

Hugo as he spoke the emphasized word.

Mildly puzzled, Drake asked, "And just why am I... 'shady?'"

"You keep to the shadows, like a cockroach; you do not show your face. And you do not see the means of your own demise, even when it is close by. I say again, you would be a fool not to kill me now."

Drake smiled. "It is a somewhat dignified way to beg for death, I grant you, but it will not happen. Brantell would take his own life at the first opportunity, and I see that you are trying to goad me into allowing you to do the same. It will not work, however. You will break."

Drake cast the Curse again; Hugo flinched, but as he was behind Drake, Drake didn't see it. Hugo flinched because he had a forbidden thought; one of escape. There was a way out, it was staring him right in the face. Snape had communicated it to him covertly, using words Drake hadn't understood. Hugo knew what Snape wanted him to do, and he knew he could possibly do it. But his conditioned, wounded mind kept turning away from it, not wanting to face it. Twice he almost moved, and twice his battered psyche kept him rooted to the spot. He couldn't take the chance.

You're going to be tortured anyway, what remained of the person he had been told him. With Drake, thinking about it is the same thing as doing it. He won't punish you any differently if you try and fail than if you think about it but don't try. Terrified, he didn't move. Drake kept his attention focused on Snape, on Snape's pain. He ignored Hugo.

Look at Snape, his mind commanded him. Look at what he's going through, and he's not afraid. He's going through unbelievable pain, and he will continue to unless I do

something. He wants me to do this... 'You do not see the means of your own demise'; Snape had meant Hugo, not himself as he intended Drake to think. Saying Drake was 'shady'; Harry had clearly told Snape, as he had told Hugo, about that amusing Ring of Reduction his students had created—

DO IT, his mind screamed at him. Feeling like he was about to jump into a pit of lava, he launched himself at Drake, swatting his wand away in the same motion. Hugo tackled Drake as Drake tried to turn, startled; they crashed to the floor a few feet from Snape, who was recovering from the Curse and in no condition to help. Drake twisted on the ground, trying to reach his wand, which was just a few feet away. Hugo swung his left arm around Drake's neck, enclosing it in a tight headlock. Drake struggled for breath as Hugo tightened his grip.

Snape had recovered enough to take in what was happening. "Brantell! No!" he shouted as he scrambled for his wand. "We need him alive!"

Hugo didn't tighten his grip further, but didn't relax it either; a part of him wanted to rip Drake's head off. It was a very appealing thought...

Drake suddenly went limp under Snape's Stunning spell. "Brantell! Let him fall." In a fog, concentrating hard to follow Snape's instructions, Hugo let go. Drake fell to the floor as Hugo sat, catching his breath, mentally adrift. The conditioning was still strong; he couldn't allow himself to think that what was happening was actually happening.

Snape cast a Full-Body Bind, then wrapped Drake in ropes. "That should hold him, for a few minutes," Snape muttered, struggling to his feet. Seeing Hugo sitting on the floor,

gazing into the distance, Snape offered a hand. "Come on, Brantell, up. It's all over."

Hugo gazed at Snape as if he had never met him before. He slowly reached out his hand. Could it be a trick? Could it really be over? It had been so long since he had even entertained the thought that it didn't seem possible. Even believing the evidence of his own eyes was like a leap of faith. Finally, he took Snape's hand, and added his own strength to Snape's as he was pulled up.

It was really true; it was over. Submerged so long, his head was finally above the water. Overcome by emotion, he lurched forward, throwing his arms around Snape and clinging to him. He started sobbing uncontrollably.

Very much taken aback—he had never embraced another man, and found the idea very distasteful—Snape tried to step away, then realized that Hugo was holding him so tightly that he would have to assault Hugo to do it. He cast Legilimens, and got Hugo's recent memories, and his emotional environment. It was one that was familiar to Snape; it was utter desolation, hopelessness, helplessness, a psyche once whole and healthy now deeply wounded. Snape realized that right then, to Hugo, Snape was the light at the end of the tunnel, a light Hugo hadn't hoped for and couldn't have hoped for. Snape felt deep compassion for Hugo, for he knew that Hugo had been through hell. He slowly, hesitantly put his left arm around Hugo's shoulders, holding him, as he kept an eye on the bound and unconscious Drake. "It's all over," he repeated quietly.

As Hugo continued sobbing, Snape cast Legilimens on Drake, looking for memories of the past hour. He saw Drake place the bomb on Marine One shortly before takeoff and make it invisible; according to Drake's memories, it could go

off any minute, or might have done so already. Snape briefly considered leaving immediately to check, but he knew he couldn't; it would mean leaving Brantell alone with his tormentor, and Snape would not do that, even for five seconds. He knew Brantell's emotional state was extremely precarious, and being left alone again after he had dared to hope could be crushing. Snape had to deal with both of them before doing anything else.

He started to disengage from Hugo; he put his hands on Hugo's shoulders and gently pushed him back. "Brantell, we have to move now. Do you understand? We're going to Harry's home, you'll be safe. It'll be all right, but we have to move. Fawkes!"

He wasn't sure if Fawkes, now that he was bonded to Arthur instead of Harry, would come, but he did. Snape levitated Drake and slung him over his shoulder. "Fawkes, we're going to Harry's home; please have Flora tell Hermione, and Red tell Pansy, to meet us there. Brantell, grab his tail feathers. Concentrate." Hugo did, Fawkes took flight, and they were immediately in Harry's living room. "Ginny!" Snape shouted.

She came running from the kitchen. "Severus, what's the..." She gaped at the sight of Snape with the captive and... "Hugo! What happened?"

Flora and Red appeared within seconds, their companions in tow. Drake still over his shoulder, Snape addressed Hermione, gesturing to Hugo, who still looked dazed, looking around. "Headmistress! Legilimens, now!"

Taken aback by his manner, she did, and an appalled expression came to her face. "Good Lord," she gasped. She looked as though she had seen a person with numerous and

gaping injuries, which he supposed it was somewhat similar to. He didn't know if Hugo would ever be all right again.

He turned to her. "Hermione," he said, and saw her blink at the first-time usage of her first name. "I asked you to do that because I want Flora and the other phoenixes to know. There is something I want them to do for him. You do not know what it is, but they will know what I mean. They may not be willing, but I ask because I think it could help him, and I know Harry would want them to do it."

Hermione concentrated on the impressions she got from Flora. "They're discussing it... they say it would be difficult, because of the condition he's in, but they think it could help... yes, they'll do it."

Snape nodded. "Good." He turned to Hugo. "Hugo, Flora is going to take you someplace, and the phoenixes are going to help you. When it's time for you to go, a phoenix will fly above you, and take you back here. Do you understand?" Hugo nodded. Flora hovered; Hugo grabbed her tail feathers, and was gone.

"What are they going to do?" asked Ginny, confused.

"Something private to phoenixes; they don't even tell their companions about it unless they do it for them. Fawkes did it for Harry once, just before Albus died, which is how I know about it, through viewing his memories." He turned to Pansy. Gesturing to Hermione, he said, "She can tell you about Brantell's condition. I don't want him taken to St. Mungo's unless it's absolutely necessary, and then, only in a private ward; it would be preferable for him to be taken care of here, in a guest room, if possible. His recovery will be difficult enough as it is; his situation must not be made public. Healer Haspberg has Apparation privileges here; she can

take a look at him. I have more things to do, but I will be back to check on him. Ginny, find your father and tell him that the man responsible for all the recent strife has been apprehended, and that the American President has likely just been killed. Tell him I will do what I can to rectify the situation."

He Disapparated, and was suddenly in the Apparation detection area of the Auror compound; Aurors were still on late-night detection shifts, protecting the homes of individuals deemed to be at high risk for an attack. Fortunately for Snape, Kingsley was there; he immediately hit Snape with a Polyjuice check. As well he should, thought Snape.

"This is your man," said Snape, hauling Drake off his shoulder and passing him to an astonished Kingsley. "The name is Leonard Drake; he is responsible for all that has happened, including the American Muggles. I must go and try to mitigate some of the damage he has caused, but I will return for a debriefing as soon as possible."

Kingsley nodded. "Drake... two of the ones executed after the broom battle had that last name."

Snape performed a quick scan with Legilimens. "His brother and father."

Kingsley nodded. "That explains a lot. Okay, we'll be expecting you." Snape asked to borrow a broom, and Disapparated.

The North Korean Muggle leader was the leader in name only; he was foolish and simpleminded, easily amused by toys, alcohol, and young women. For mundane functions of leadership, such as visiting schools and congratulating veteran soldiers, he was allowed to function as the leader of

the government. For anything that truly mattered, however, one of the true leaders assumed his form via Polyjuice Potion to interact with their Muggle subordinates.

That wizard was in the leader's office when a subordinate entered and bowed. "Marine One has crashed, sir. The President's death has not been confirmed, but it is all but certain."

The wizard nodded and dismissed the man. He Apparated to the outside of the military planning area, then entered. The Muggle military men stood; the wizard only spoke one word. "Begin."

Snape Apparated into the air above Camp David, and mounted the broom as he fell. He was quickly able to see the emergency vehicles heading for the crash site; from his high altitude, they stood out easily in contrast to the countryside. He hadn't expected to get there in time to prevent the President's death, which had probably happened as he was apprehending Drake.

He set out to do the last thing he could in the Muggle world before leaving it to itself for the time being. He Apparated back to Drake's hideaway, Summoned Harry's Invisibility Cloak, then Apparated to the White House. He wondered whether the American Aurors would have established a presence around the very new American president, but he somehow doubted it. Again, he scanned people until he found who he was looking for; fortunately, the man was alone. Snape cast a Forgetfulness Charm on the doorknob; anyone who tried to enter the room would temporarily forget why they had been trying. He knew it wouldn't work for long, however.

He entered the room and threw off the Invisibility Cloak, startling the man inside. "Mr. Patterson, as you have no doubt guessed, I am a wizard. I am here to tell you that the man who threatened you, and who is responsible for your son's death, has been apprehended. I tell you this so you will know that you are safe, and your family is safe. You may take any action you wish without fear of repercussions."

Patterson stared dumbly for a few seconds; clearly it was all quite a shock. Finally, he said, "You're British. Why is an American not telling me this?"

"An American did not apprehend this man, though I suspect you will soon be visited by the American wizards. I should mention, in case they do not, that we now know for a fact that the sarin gas attack was conducted by the same wizard who threatened you. I do not particularly care, but you may want to re-evaluate your war with Iran, based on this information."

Patterson paused, taking it all in. "Do you have proof?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "No, I do not. Nothing that you would consider proof, anyway. Do feel free to continue your war, if it pleases you."

"I didn't mean that," said the American quickly. "I didn't think this was a good idea. I'd just like something I can take to the people."

"You are about to become the American leader, Mr. Patterson. *Lead* the people." *Politicians*, thought Snape as he Disapparated.

Patterson walked to the door and opened it; the Chief of Staff hurried up to him. "There you are. Mr. Vice-President, are you ready to be sworn in?"

"Yes, I am. Have they recovered the football from the crash site?"

"Yes, sir. The Joint Chiefs have informed me that North Korea has just launched four nuclear missiles at the South. Impact estimated in five minutes."

Patterson felt the weight of the enormous responsibility of what he was about to do, but at least he was free to act as he saw fit. "Make sure they open that thing right away. I want those launch codes ready."

Snape Apparated to the Burrow's living room, where he found Arthur, Dudley, Colin, and Luna sitting around Arthur's computer. "The President is dead," he announced.

"We know, it's all over the news websites," said Colin.

Dudley had his cell phone out, holding it to his ear as he looked at the screen. "I'm holding on for—" He abruptly looked down. "Mr. Barclay?"

"Yes, Mr. Dursley. What information do you have?"

"One of our people just caught the man who did all this. The sarin attack, everything."

"Excellent, Mr. Dursley. I am most gratified to hear it, but we have a new problem now. Do you know of North Korea's attack against the South?"

"Only what I've seen on the news, just rumors so far. Has it happened?"

"I'm afraid so. I've just been informed that North Korea has launched what appear to be four nuclear weapons; they may

be striking their targets at any time. Does this man have anything to do with that?"

Dudley repeated the information and question aloud; Luna looked horrified as Snape took the phone from Dudley. "This is Severus Snape speaking, Mr. Barclay. Yes, the man in question suggested the attack to the wizards who control Muggle North Korea, and—"

Snape stopped speaking as he saw Dudley and Arthur frozen, unmoving. Snape glanced at Colin, who was moving as usual, then Luna. Luna appeared to be about to cry. "Wizards," she repeated. "Wizards just launched nuclear weapons at Muggles..."

Colin looked at her sorrowfully. "Luna, you can't—"

"How many will die?" she asked him.

"Luna—"

"How many?" she demanded, raising her voice.

He sighed. "At least a hundred thousand, probably more."

She shook her head. "I can't allow that. If it were wizards fighting wizards, or Muggles fighting Muggles, I wouldn't do anything. But wizards are supposed to stay out of Muggle affairs. This Drake has already caused one war, and he's helping start another. This isn't right."

"You shouldn't do it, Luna," repeated Colin earnestly.

"Would you, if you were me?" she asked. He didn't answer. "You'd let a hundred thousand people die, just so I wouldn't have to break the rule I made for myself?"

He sighed again, and looked into her eyes. "All I know is that I love you."

She smiled sadly, and kissed the back of his hand. "I know. I'd probably say the same thing if it were you. But I'm going to do this. I'm not going to let a hundred thousand people die at the hands of wizards."

Reluctantly, Colin nodded. "You can't just make the missiles disappear, though. Their launch has already been recorded. Remember, the wizarding world is a hair's breadth away from being exposed; there's already too much evidence around. If something big—"

"The tipping point, I remember," she assured him. "You said that North Korea was new at making these weapons. I'll do something that'll make it look like they didn't make them right, or something. Don't worry."

"I'm much more worried about you than I am about that."

"I know. I'm going to go, I need to concentrate to do this." She resumed time, stood, and Disapparated.

In her room, she froze time again, sat on the floor, and focused on her remote eye. Looking at Korea from above, she zoomed in, looking for the missiles. It took her a few minutes, but she found all four, frozen in mid-flight. She looked inside them, at their internal mechanisms, but didn't know enough about them to create a malfunction that she was sure would cause them not to go off. I'm not going to let a hundred thousand people die just because I don't know how to make these not work for sure, she thought, annoyed.

She hit on the idea of simply removing all of the nuclear material from them. She knew she could do it, and it would guarantee that almost all the people who would have died

would survive. At worst, they would be like normal missiles, blowing up on impact but not causing that much damage. She knew it would seem strange that missiles that others thought were nuclear turned out not to be, but she was sure ways could be found to explain it. She couldn't think of a better way, so she did it. She focused, and the nuclear material disappeared from each missile in turn. Over a hundred thousand people who would have died, now would not. She started time again.

At the Burrow, Snape finished reporting to Barclay on what had happened. It occurred to him to tell Barclay that the nuclear weapons were being dealt with, but it would give Luna away, so they would just have to find out for themselves.

Barclay was now talking to Dudley, but putting him on hold every few minutes while he conferred with advisors. Dudley listened to Barclay, then covered the phone as Barclay put him on hold again. "He says that the missiles have landed in South Korea, but didn't go off as expected. They don't know why."

"That's odd," remarked Arthur. "Good, but odd."

A minute later, Dudley listened again, then reported. "He says that American nuclear submarines have launched a counterstrike. Four nuclear missiles, heading for North Korea."

A horrified Colin looked at Snape, who gestured for him not to be too obvious. "Why did they do that, if the North's bombs didn't work?" asked Arthur.

"I imagine the Americans launched before the North's missiles hit their targets," responded Dudley. "Is that right,

Mr. Barclay?" Dudley listened, then nodded. "He says yes, almost certainly."

"I have a feeling," said Arthur grimly, "that when these land, they're going to work the way they're supposed to."

Snape stood, silently gesturing Colin to follow him; they went into the kitchen. "Do you think she knows about the American missiles?" asked Colin anxiously.

"Undoubtedly," said Snape. "She may well be viewing this house remotely, right now. Unfortunately, she can do nothing. She must allow these missiles to reach their targets, unimpeded and unaltered."

"Why?"

"Because anything else would be noticed, and unexplainable," said Snape patiently. "She was able to alter the North Korean bombs, on the premise that they were manufactured imperfectly. Such an explanation will not be possible with American bombs, especially four of them. Particularly after what happened with the Korean bombs, any malfunction in these would be highly suspicious, and be the 'tipping point' you have described. She knows this, and she will know she must allow them to fall."

Despondent, Colin sat at the table. "She saved a whole lot of people, and wants to be able to save more, but she can't because it would expose the wizarding world. Remind you of anything?"

Snape nodded. "Harry, on nine-eleven."

Colin's sadness came through clearly in his tone. "She saw that happen, she told me. She saw Harry, how it affected him, and she didn't want it to happen to her. And now, here

it is." He stood. "Luna, if you're seeing this remotely, take me to where you are. I want to be with you."

A few seconds passed, and he was suddenly standing in her bedroom. She looked up at him, tears behind her eyes. He sat on the floor next to her and reached out to hold her; she put her arms around him, and dissolved in tears. He held her tightly as she cried harder and harder into his shoulder. He glanced up at the bedroom window, and saw the wind gently blowing the leaves of a tree. Time was running.

* * * * *

Next, in Chapter 16 (the final chapter): Hugo takes the first steps along the road to recovery; Luna considers her future as she recovers from the emotional blow she received; Harry's friends, and the entire wizarding world, wait anxiously to see if Harry can return to human form.

From Chapter 16: Hugo shuddered. "It was very close, believe me. It took more willpower than I thought I had, to do what I did. That's why I said you saved me; I could never have done it without your being there, knowing you needed me to do that. It was as if seeing another person who was still free woke me up a little, reminded me that the hope I had trained myself not to see was still there."

16. Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Snape was impressed to later discover that when failing to stop the missiles that hit North Korea, Luna had taken another action that he had thought at the time was necessary, but hadn't mentioned: she had made the entire country of North Korea a magic-free zone, or more precisely, an area in which only love magic could be used. She had realized that the North Korean Dark wizards, in their desperation and anger at the radical turn of events, might well take extreme magical steps that would expose the wizarding world. He did not know that she did it because she had looked into the minds of a few of the Dark wizards and saw that after the failure of their missiles, they planned to magically transport most of their remaining nuclear weapons to the South and detonate them, regardless of how it would appear. She had decided that stopping all magic was the safe thing to do, and would prevent any danger of exposure without causing any additional danger, since a lack of magic couldn't be noticed by Muggles. It could be noticed by wizards, but she wasn't worried about that.

He felt pangs of conscience at what he had done that had contributed to her pain. He had known that Drake urged the North Koreans to attack, and given them reason to think they would suffer no retaliation; Drake killed the President, and compromised the vice-president so as to prevent him from retaliating. Snape had quickly informed the vice-president that he was free to act, knowing what he would likely do. If Snape had not informed him of Drake's capture, Patterson might not have launched the missiles at the North, fearing it would mean the death of his family. Snape told

him about Drake's capture partly because it contributed to undoing the damage Drake had caused, but more because he wanted America to be able to respond with nuclear weapons if the North used them on the South; Snape felt that the North Korean wizards deserved to be deposed and killed, and the American nuclear attack was perhaps the only way to accomplish it. Snape knew that after the North Korean wizards attempted to use nuclear weapons on the South, the international wizarding community should band together to remove the North Korean wizards for flouting the agreements not to interfere with Muggles, but he had no confidence that they would do so. In addition, there was no objective proof that it was not simply the North Korean Muggle government that had launched the attack. In all likelihood, nothing would have been done.

As it was, Snape strongly suspected that most of the North Korean Dark wizards were now dead; deprived of their magic, they would have either died in one of the blasts or later from radiation, unable to escape. Snape felt this was a desirable outcome. It was unfortunate that tens of thousands of Muggles had died as well, but their wizard masters had sealed their fate. Snape knew this was probably of little consolation to Luna, however. He hoped she understood that she had done what she could, and that not acting at all would simply have meant that the South Koreans would have died as well, and the North Korean wizards probably would have survived to continue their ruthless rule. If anyone was responsible for the tens of thousands of Muggle lives lost, Snape knew, it was he; had Snape not released Patterson from his straitjacket, he would have waited to retaliate, they would have discovered that the North's missiles hadn't worked, and wouldn't have launched their own missiles. Oddly, Snape found that his conscience was more disturbed by the distress his actions

caused Luna than by the tens of thousands of deaths he was indirectly responsible for. He contemplated why that was.

"I don't know what the phoenixes did for him, but I do know that it really helped," said Pansy to Snape in Harry's living room. "I'd never seen a case like this before, thank goodness. Healer Haspberg saw him last night, and even then she said he was doing surprisingly well, considering what he'd been through. But she also said he'd have a long road back."

"As would be expected," said Snape. "I am pleased that the phoenixes were helpful. I will see him now; I just wanted to get the medical report first."

Pansy nodded. "Professor... what will you be doing?"

"Talking to him," replied Snape simply. He saw in her eyes that she understood the 'none of your business' subtext to his words and tone. He walked upstairs to the guest rooms, and walked into the first one on the right.

Snape had been in Harry's home before, but never in one of the guest rooms. This one, and Snape assumed they were all the same, was fairly large and had a bed, a comfortable reclining chair, a sofa, a coffee table, and a bookcase with a reasonable selection of books, including some Muggle titles. A few issues of the Prophet were on the coffee table. Hugo was sitting up in the bed, reading *From Albus, To Harry*. Snape nodded, and silently sat in the chair next to the bed on Hugo's left. Hugo put the book down on his right side, leaving it face up on the page he was currently reading. "Did you ever read this?" he asked Snape curiously.

Snape shook his head. "I viewed enough of his memories to be confident that there is nothing in there I did not know already. Are you finding it helpful?"

Hugo thought before he answered; he seemed to be pausing for reflection before doing anything, observed Snape. As if the simplest experience is a new one, that has to be seriously considered. "As much for the tone as for anything specific he says. He really comes through, comes alive in these pages. It's a lot like it was, listening to him talk. It's easy to take for granted when you can do it. I didn't think I took it for granted at the time, but now, I think I did."

"I suspect you do not take anything for granted at the moment."

Hugo again paused for a few seconds, then nodded solemnly. "No, I don't. If I ever do, it'll probably mean I've recovered. But that's not something I take for granted, either. I may recover, but it's difficult right now to think beyond today, beyond this moment." Snape nodded, saying nothing.

They sat in silence for a minute. "I want to thank you, for rescuing me."

Amused, Snape raised an eyebrow. "My recollection is that it was you who saved me."

"I think we both know that's not true. You went there on purpose, you let yourself get captured on purpose. I didn't need my extra sense to know that. You would never be so careless."

Kingsley, so far, had been the only other one to poke that hole in Snape's version of events. "I did not know that you were being held," Snape pointed out. "I came to capture Drake, not to rescue anyone."

"And yet, you did. What would you have done if he hadn't been so careless to allow me to attack him like that? He was

usually fairly careful."

"Wizards often do not think in terms of physical assault, as Drake and the African mercenary discovered, not to mention the unfortunate Professor Shady," said Snape, deadpan. "I felt certain that he would make a mistake at some point. I suspected that he would start using the ring himself after the African was apprehended, and that would make him more susceptible to mental error. And it did; he took your obedience for granted in spite of the fact that he had not fully enslaved you."

Hugo shuddered. "It was very close, believe me. It took more willpower than I thought I had, to do what I did. That's why I said you saved me; I could never have done it without your being there, knowing you needed me to do that. It was as if seeing another person who was still free woke me up a little, reminded me that the hope I had trained myself not to see was still there." He paused; Snape could see the memories in Hugo's eyes, the damage that might or might not ever heal. "That was the worst thing about what happened... not being able to hope."

Snape nodded. "There is no greater death than the death of hope."

Hugo looked quizzical. "Who said that?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I did." To Hugo's 'no, but seriously' expression, Snape shrugged. "I was not quoting anyone in particular; I am sure that it, or a variation on it, has been said by many. Anyone could recognize its truth, but very few are so well equipped as you and I to truly understand it."

"I thought about you a few times," said Hugo. "What happened to you and what happened to me were different,

but similar in some important aspects: we both couldn't experience the full range of human thought and emotion, and we thought there was no chance our situation could change." There was another long pause. "I also want to thank you for requesting the phoenixes to do what they did. It was the most incredible thing." Hugo shook his head in awe at the memory. "I don't think I could be having this conversation with you now if that hadn't happened. It was like... the closest thing to heaven that can happen on earth. It was a powerful reminder that there was hope, that there was something worth continuing for, that I could come back. It was so powerful that it broke through a lot of the conditioning."

"I was not sure that they would be willing to do it," remarked Snape. "I have known them only to do it for companions, and they normally do not like to be near the... emotionally damaged. I know it was difficult for Fawkes to be in my presence for all those years. But Albus loved me, so though Fawkes sometimes was absent while I was with Albus, he frequently endured my presence, for Albus's sake. I do know one thing: if you were not a good person, someone they considered worthy of assistance, they would not have done it. Phoenixes are very... fussy."

Hugo considered it for a moment, then had another thought. He looked at Snape and asked, "Professor, why are you here?"

Snape could see that the question was asked out of curiosity, not suspicion, and thought it was a fair one. "I am here to help you, but also, to help myself. Ginny has recently taken it upon herself to assist my... emotional reclamation. I am teaching her Legilimency, but it is not an exchange. She would wish to help me whether or not I was doing anything for her. Harry would wish to as well, of course, but Ginny is

better suited to it than he, at least in my case; she is more..." He searched for a phrase. "...emotionally aware of other people than he is. In any case, she wants to help because she sees a need, and feels she can do it."

Hugo slowly nodded, understanding. "And you see a need, and feel you can do it."

"It would not have occurred to me to do this before my time with her, and even if it had, I would have been unwilling, because it involves lowering emotional barriers I had kept up, unnecessarily, for a long time. Albus occasionally said, 'What we do for others, we do for ourselves.' In this situation, the truth of that seems very obvious. I am, it seems to me, the utterly logical person for you to talk to, to be a pillar of support on your journey back. I did Legilimens on you briefly after Drake was subdued, and I knew that, as literally as is possible for a human, you had been through hell." He met Hugo's eyes. "I knew how you felt, as I have been there."

"So, I will come by for an hour or two every day, usually after my classes have ended. We can talk, we can sit in silence, you can read; it will be up to you. But it occurs to me that there is some irony in the notion that if I am to help you back, I must take more steps along my own journey back." Snape paused, and a smile came to his eyes, and his tone. "Otherwise, what sort of example would I be?"

Hugo glanced at Snape with appreciation. "A very human one."

Arthur read the Sunday Prophet carefully; it was nice to read a paper that contained mostly good news for a change. Drake's capture had happened too late to be written about in Saturday's paper, which mostly contained news about

Trent's insurrection and later arrest. Two editorials had praised Arthur for acting firmly, while two others had suggested that arresting a popular political opponent smacked of political repression and retribution. You can't make everyone happy, Arthur had mused.

Sunday's paper, however, was all about Drake and his capture. Drake's picture was on the front page, as was Snape's; Snape had grudgingly submitted to an interview in which he detailed how Drake had been captured. To Arthur's surprise, Snape went out of his way to credit him, and the Ministry's Muggle Liaison office in general, saying that the capture could never have been made without information gained from observations of the Muggle world. To Arthur's surprise, Snape didn't say a word about Hugo; Snape had made it clear that Hugo's role in all that had happened was not to be made public. If Hugo wanted to make it so after he recovered, he could, but Snape felt that the choice should be his.

Dentus had already told Arthur that Drake's capture would definitely cement his political status; Arthur had been around long enough to know that politicians got credit and blame for things that happened on their watch whether they were responsible or not. The fallout from Trent's arrest would be minimized, and Ministry employees would appear for work Monday uncomplainingly.

After breakfast, Dudley and Colin came over to give him a briefing on events in the Muggle world. Yesterday, Arthur had learned that the events of Friday night had instantly made America a virtual pariah in the world community; it was seen as having fired nuclear weapons at another country with no provocation. The Americans had protested that their information had clearly shown that nuclear weapons had been fired, but since there had been no

nuclear explosions in South Korea, very few people and countries believed the Americans. Most were inclined to think that Patterson, taking over after his president had been assassinated, overreacted to news of a North Korean attack without getting enough information, and had panicked and shown a lack of restraint. China was beside itself in its anger, and Saturday afternoon had seen enormous, spontaneous anti-American rallies all over the world. There had been protest rallies in America as well, though somewhat less vociferous.

"Well, there's more bad news for America," began Dudley. "The Chinese did what a lot of people thought they'd do: they've started a massive sell-off of U.S. government bonds, which are called Treasury bills, or T-bills. The idea is to punish America economically for what it did. Now, I'm not an economics expert, so this is just from what I've read on the internet. Their selling the bonds drives the price of the bonds down, and other countries start selling so they get a better price before they go down too far. Interest rates will go up, which not only means that prices will go up, but the stock market will—"

"Dudley," interrupted Arthur humorously. "I'm fairly sure I know less about economics than you do. Just tell me the bottom-line effects."

Dudley paused, searching for the right phrase. "The U.S. economy is going to go into the toilet."

Arthur chuckled. "Okay, it can be a little more specific than that."

"I was going to say, everyone expects the U.S. stock market to crash. It's lucky for the Americans that this happened on a Friday night, after the market closed. The Americans

probably won't open the stock market all next week while they try to do emergency repair work, but it's going to be bad whenever they open. The next year is going to be a tough one for the Americans. Higher prices, jobs lost, and so forth."

"As I understand it," said Arthur, "the world is pretty economically interdependent, and the U.S. economy is the center of it. Isn't this going to hurt everyone?"

Dudley nodded. "Somewhat, yes, but the Americans most of all. There's a lot of outrage out there. Some of it may go away when people find out that the North actually launched nuclear weapons, or was trying to, or that the Americans had reason to think so. But a lot of people don't care; their attitude is that the Americans should have waited until the bombs actually went off. The Americans claim that they were trying to stop more nuclear weapons from being used, and that waiting could have cost thousands of South Korean lives. But the world isn't in much of a mood to listen to, or believe, anything the Americans say. Their reasons for attacking Iraq turned out to be wrong a year ago, so that affects their credibility now."

"What I thought was especially interesting was the Japanese," added Colin. "Japan's been America's ally for sixty years, they always do what the Americans want. And they own the most T-bills of any country; if they joined the sell-off, it would be like a death blow to the American economy. It would be really crushing. Japan hasn't done that, but they—very conspicuously—haven't ruled it out. People think that they're using the possibility as leverage with the Americans, to get them to do what the Japanese think they should do. Also, Japan's public opinion had a very strong reaction; since they were the only country ever before hit by nuclear weapons, they have an extreme sensitivity to the

idea of them being used. Anyway, if America doesn't start hopping to the rest of the world's tune, they're not going to crawl out of this hole anytime soon."

"Most countries want Patterson's resignation, since he was the one that launched the missiles," continued Dudley. "He has to pick a vice-president, who would become the president if he resigned. Some countries are actually floating suggestions about which American politicians should be chosen, which is usually a big no-no.

"As for the Americans, their politics are pretty chaotic right now. There's the war with Iran, the recent assassination of their President, reaction from what they did to North Korea, and the economy, which everyone knows is about to fall apart. No one has any idea what's going to happen in the future, which brings us to you."

Arthur sighed and nodded. "Barclay called me three times yesterday; I'm going to have to get one of those cell phones. Now that we have the proof, he's very keen for the wizards to start cleaning up the mess that Drake made, starting with Iran. The Americans, with their Legilimens, visited Drake yesterday, and the Persians are coming today. I'm hoping to get together with my counterparts from those countries after that and work out some agreement that would involve both America and Iran pulling back. The International Confederation of Wizards will have an emergency meeting tonight, which of course I'll be giving a speech at. So, I'm kind of busy."

"Well, you wanted this job," observed Colin humorously.

Arthur chuckled. "Not really, but I take your point. I'm not complaining; it's good to be able to accomplish something. I just hope we can. All right, thanks, boys. I'm sure I'll be

hearing plenty about the Muggle situation, but do keep me informed."

They started to leave, but he asked them to stay a minute. "I just wanted to say, since I haven't yet, that both of you have done a great job with this whole situation. I want to make sure you know I appreciate your efforts. And Colin, congratulations on you and Luna. And on the phoenix, it's been a busy week for you."

Colin grinned. "Thanks, Arthur. It's been busy, but good." Mostly good, he added to himself, if you don't count having your girlfriend being desperately unhappy because she could have saved a hundred thousand people but didn't.

"The phoenix that joined you, did she have a name from her last companion?"

Colin tried to answer as honestly as he could. "I'm her first companion."

"Have you given her a name?"

Colin wondered what they would think; Luna had quite liked it. "Yes, I have. I'm calling her 'Mickey.'"

Arthur and Dudley both gave him quizzical looks. Anticipating their comments, he added, "It can be a girl's name. It just seemed appropriate, don't ask me why."

Dudley chuckled. "It sounds like a Luna-ish name to give a phoenix. Are you sure she didn't have any influence on how the phoenix was named?"

Colin smiled. "It wouldn't surprise me at all."

As Colin and Dudley briefed Arthur, Luna sat in her bedroom writing the behind-the-scenes story of Arthur's campaign. Perhaps, she thought, 'composing' would be a better word; she wasn't writing with a quill and ink, but rather, willing the words to appear on parchment. When she finished a page, she pressed it against the wall next to the other ones so she could see the story's progress.

"That looks like a convenient way of doing things," remarked her father as he walked through the open bedroom door. "I may have you set me up something where I can do that for the Quibbler."

She turned and smiled. "I'd be happy to. If I were going to do this for any longer, I'd get one of those Muggle computers. I've discovered they're pretty convenient for writing, once you learn how to type."

"So, you're not going to continue to be a reporter?"

She shook her head. "I like it all right; if this other thing hadn't happened to me, I could see myself doing it for a living. But the last thing I need to be around is news."

"Because it could be tempting," he surmised.

"Not that I think this kind of thing is going to happen all the time; I know it's really rare. But even the normal news has information about things that I would want to change. I just think it's better in general to be away from it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Be a hermit, live in a mountain cave," she joked. "I could marry Colin and be a housewife and mother; I'd have no problem with that. I'd think about anything that came along

that seemed to be right, but right now, I want to be ambitionless."

"The bit about having children strikes me as a good idea," he said, half-joking. "You're sure you want to marry Colin? It hasn't been that long since you've been a couple with him."

"I've told you, Daddy, you get all the information you need from a phoenix-look. I don't need to know what his favorite color is or what kind of food he likes. I'm in love with him, and I know he's in love with me. That's all I need to know."

"But how can he be as sure as you? He can't take a phoenix-look."

"That's true. But we don't have to be in a huge hurry; I'll let him be the one to decide when to suggest that we get married. I know he's not going anywhere."

Her father chuckled. "He'll probably get a lot more interest from women than he did before, now that it's known that he's a phoenix companion."

"That's true," she conceded. "It'll be good for his ego; he's always been very shy around women. It'll be strange; I'll be around him as a phoenix, and some woman will start chatting him up, not knowing that his girlfriend is sitting right there watching."

He laughed. "It's a good thing phoenixes aren't violent. Do you think they'll back off once he tells them he's in a relationship? I know, many women wouldn't, but since phoenix companions are known to be people of integrity..."

"It'll be interesting to find that out. But I have to imagine that some women will be like, 'Oh, Luna Lovegood, he can do much better than that.'"

She could see the love in her father's eyes. "He couldn't do any better than that."

She stood and hugged him. "Thanks, Daddy." She might be all-powerful and have a partner who loved her, but she still needed her father.

For the first time in a month, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, Ron, and Pansy sat down to dinner in the dining room of Harry's home. Ron and Neville had been working almost every day for that time, including Sundays, and Hermione's Hogwarts duties would have made attending difficult. All had been there since four o'clock; preparing dinner had been a group project. Fortunately, the kitchen was large enough to accommodate five people comfortably.

"I have an idea," said Ron as he sat. "Next week, we get food delivered."

"I told you you didn't have to help if you didn't want to," said Hermione in a reprimanding tone.

"I'm sure he knows that, Hermione," pointed out Neville. "After all, he did very little to help."

Ron gave Neville an obligatory annoyed glance as Hermione nodded. "That's true," she agreed.

"Did he ever help with the cooking when he was younger?" Pansy asked Ginny.

"Nope. He only went into the kitchen to get food. He would throw together a sandwich if he absolutely had to."

"Did anyone ask Hugo if he wanted to join us?" asked Ron, in an obvious effort to change the subject.

"I did, but he said no, he wasn't hungry," said Pansy, her tone changing to one of concern at the thought of Hugo. "I think it's probably too soon for him to be with a bunch of people, anyway."

"I haven't heard too much about what happened with him, just the basic details," said Ron. "How's he doing?"

Hermione winced at the memory. "I couldn't believe what I saw when I did Legilimens the other night, after Snape brought him back. It was so horrible..." She quickly decided against providing further details; she completely understood and agreed with Snape's reason for wanting Hugo provided with maximum privacy. "But Pansy said he's doing better, better than they expected this soon."

"How long is he going to stay here?" wondered Ron.

"As long as he wants to," said Pansy. "He has to be someplace safe, and this house is pretty much the safest place on the planet, which is good from a psychological point of view. We're going to bring him food several times a day; he knows he's free to wander around the house. At some point he may want to play with James; that might be good for him."

"He can become all sorts of different colors," put in Ginny. "That reminds me, James really startled me the other day; he came running into the room just after making himself pitch black."

The others laughed. "Can you imagine if Fred and George had been able to do that, without a wand, when they were kids?" asked Ron.

"You and I would have gone years without knowing what our true skin color was," agreed Ginny. "They've come over to

spend time with James a few times, in the past few weeks. I told them they can only do it under my close supervision. I don't want James to be corrupted. Who knows what they'd teach him."

"Spoken like a true mother," said Hermione, amused.

"Spoken like a sister of those two," suggested Ron.

Ginny pointed at Ron in agreement. "I know the dangers very well. Unfortunately, I have a feeling they're going to make it a quest now. I'm going to have to really come down hard on them, I think, to get the message across. They mean it to be harmless, but him not needing a wand makes misbehavior a completely different thing, and I'm really not going to put up with them encouraging it. They can train their own kids to be troublemakers, if they ever have any."

Nobody talked for a minute as they all worked on their food. "Ron, Neville," asked Ginny, "did they, and I suppose I mean Snape, find out anything more about this Drake than they released publicly?"

"Apart from what he did to Hugo, I don't think so," said Neville. "Oh, one thing. The American Aurors, going over the place yesterday after we told them where it was, ran across a woman walking around the place. They were able to catch her; she was someone Drake had enslaved a long time ago, three or four years."

Pansy gave Ron a significant look. "Is she the one who—"

"Yes, she is," answered Ron uncomfortably.

"Are you angry with her?" asked Ginny, her tone showing she understood it could be a sensitive question.

"I've thought about it, but I've decided that you might as well be angry with the wand of the wizard who hurt you with it. She had zero free will, she was just a tool. Kingsley isn't sure the Americans can ever get her back to what she was."

"I talked to Healer Haspberg about this yesterday, of course," said Pansy. "For someone who had it done completely, they can come back, but it takes a long time and there can be serious emotional damage. That kind of conditioning is hard to undo."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "It's amazing, the kind of cruelty that people do when they fall into despair. He must have been predisposed to it, I have to think, because most people wouldn't do what he did even if they lost a brother and a father, even if the circumstances were totally unfair."

"Oh, that reminds me, another thing Kingsley said," added Neville, "was that in looking for the roots of what happened, Snape isolated one day where Drake had an epiphany, more or less, just decided that this was what he had to do. It happened while he was asleep. The guy remembered what day it was, and... he was sleeping at the exact time Harry drove out the 'evil' bits of Voldemort. When Drake woke up, he was different."

The others traded amazed expressions. "That's... extra creepy," said Pansy.

"Tell me about it," agreed Neville. "It's hard to think it's a coincidence. I'm sure you all remember that Harry said after that happened that Albus told him that some evil entity was part of Voldemort, and that it would just find someone else after it was driven out. So either Drake was the one it found, or it was an amazing coincidence."

"It seems almost beyond ironic," said Hermione, "that Voldemort was the one who caused Drake's despair in the first place, then the entity that was a part of him just moved on to Drake to cause more. But I suppose that's just how evil works; Harry said that Albus told him that evil basically spreads itself in that way. The more despair it can cause, the stronger it gets, and it becomes a cycle. That's why we, and especially Harry, have to do our best to spread love, to fight that."

"In that case," suggested Neville, "it might be a good idea for Arthur to try to change how the Choosing works, if he can. The way it works made it possible for Trent to act as though the energy of love was politicized, that we were trying to take over. We know that's absurd, but some people might believe it. It might be better if there was no way to benefit from it politically."

"I don't know, it doesn't seem right to change the way something's worked for five hundred years just because different people benefit than used to," argued Ron. "Besides, this might make more people interested in it."

"I think it'll come down to how Arthur does as Minister," said Hermione. "If people think he does a good job, they might be less keen to change the system. But I know there'll be a lot of pressure on Arthur to change it, from the people who were Trent's strongest supporters. It's hard to say what'll happen."

"It might depend on what Harry says, too," suggested Pansy. "I mean, we all know Harry, he's never going to want to take a position on something like that. But he may have to. I mean, the Prophet suggested, and it makes sense, that there's another one like him who decided this. They'll ask Harry if he would have Chosen if he hadn't been out of commission at the time, and they'll point out that the

system allows someone like him to basically choose the Minister; that might be an argument for scrapping this system."

"Well, if we got an unfair advantage, now was definitely the time to get it," mused Hermione. The others nodded in agreement.

"So, when's Harry supposed to be back?" asked Ron.

"Mid-December, apparently," said Ginny. "I'll be counting the days. Also, I'm thinking of surprising him. When he comes back, there'll be a new addition to the family."

Impressed, Neville glanced at her stomach. "Wow, and you're not even showing."

She smiled. "Not like that, obviously. No, I'm going to get a dog. We always talked about having one, but never got around to doing it. So, I'm going to do it."

"That's great," said Neville. "What kind?"

"I'll probably take James with me, see what he likes," said Ginny, "but I'm thinking of a golden retriever. Golden retriever puppies are really cute."

"Of course, by the time James gets done with it, it'll be a purple retriever," pointed out Ron.

The others laughed. "No, even though it's cute the way he does that all the time, I'm going to have to start insisting that he not change the color of anything alive, starting with the dog," said Ginny wistfully. "We all have to grow up sometime."

"Except Fred and George," said Ron.

"I guess there's always exceptions," agreed Ginny.

December 19, 2002

6:01 p.m. GMT

"I can't believe the number of people who wanted him to do this publicly, in spite of the fact that he wouldn't be wearing any clothes when he came back," said Hermione. She, Ginny, Neville, Ron, Pansy, Molly, Arthur, and James were in the living room of Harry's home.

"I can't believe there were two articles in the Prophet about the fact that he'd be trying today," said Molly. "One is all right, but two?"

"Well, that's my fault," admitted Arthur. "I happened to mention to a few people that today was the day he'd be doing it. It never occurred to me that they'd run and tell the Prophet."

"They probably just told everyone they knew, and it didn't take long for it to get to the Prophet," suggested Molly.

"Daddy come back!" blurted James excitedly.

"Yes, he is," smiled Ginny. "It's the tenth time he's said that in the past few days. The funny thing is, he was saying it before I told him that it was going to happen soon. I assume Harry's been telling him in their bond."

Pansy and Hermione got the information from Harry through their phoenixes. "He says he's ready anytime," said Pansy.

Ginny nodded, stood, and walked down the hall and into the bedroom. Harry, in phoenix form, was on the floor of the bedroom. Ginny quickly pulled off her robe and other

clothes. "Okay, go ahead," she said. Please, please let nothing go wrong, she thought. She didn't want to think it, partly because Harry's phoenix sense would know she was uncertain and nervous, but she couldn't help it.

The phoenix's form started to change. Within a few seconds, to her vast relief, Harry was lying on the floor naked, curled up in a nearly fetal position. He looked up at Ginny; she offered her hand to help him up. "Welcome back," she said with a wide grin.

He took her hand and stood gingerly, as if hesitant to stress his new body overly much at first. He stretched his arms, and looked at her quizzically. "Why are you naked too?"

"I knew you would be, and I just wanted to make you more comfortable," she explained innocently.

"Ah," he replied. "I thought it had to do with your needs."

She laughed. "That sounds good, but there's a bunch of people out in the living room waiting for you."

He smiled, with as much of a leer as was possible for him. "We could make it quick."

She tried to look disapproving through her smile. "That's not the kind of thing I want to encourage."

"I could stop time," he pointed out.

She considered it for a few seconds, then smiled. "All right."

To the people in the living room, no more than three minutes had passed since Ginny went to the bedroom. Harry teleported himself and Ginny into the living room. A cheer went up, and James raced to his father. "Daddy!"

Smiling broadly, Harry picked up James and kissed him. "I missed you so much," he said. "I was there with you, but I still missed you." He hugged James, kissed him again, then handed him to Ginny so he could hug the others in turn: Hermione, Pansy, Ron, Neville, Molly, and finally Arthur. As he let go of Arthur, Harry's expression was somber. "I'm very sorry, Arthur. I feel like what happened to you is my fault. I know you never wanted to be Minister."

Arthur shrugged and patted Harry on the shoulder. "I knew what I was getting into," he said reassuringly. "You may have had the intuition, but it was my decision. You shouldn't feel bad. My life will be busy for five years, and then I'll relax and spend time with my grandchildren."

Harry sat on the sofa, with one arm around Ginny and the other holding James on his lap. The others took seats around the room. "I see your scar is gone," said Hermione. "People were actually speculating about that; most assumed it would be. There'd be no reason it would still be there." She frowned at him. "But you also look..."

She drew her wand, cast a spell at him, and the number '213' appeared in midair next to her wand. She did a quick mental calculation, and nodded. "Your body's age, according to the spell, is seventeen years, nine months. I guess that means that this is the age when your body stopped growing, or very close to it."

"Yes, this is pretty much the age I had to come back as," he agreed. "Phoenixes who have Burning days grow back to adulthood quickly, then stop growing. I wasn't going to get any older."

"So, you picked up five years," remarked Ron. "Cool. Were you aware of the time passing over the past two months?"

"Yes and no," he answered, looking thoughtful. "My memories, my consciousness, was with the phoenixes, as you know. They don't think in terms of time, so I wasn't really aware of time passing exactly, but I was aware of myself, and could communicate with the group consciousness in a way. I wasn't able to be very aware of human events, though, or to conceptualize much that a human could. I only found out the other day that Arthur was the Minister, and that was from Fawkes. Anyway, it was really amazing, a really unusual experience. I understand the phoenixes and their culture even better than I did before. I spent some time poking around the spiritual realm, which I'm pretty sure I can now do as a human, which I really couldn't before. I talked to Albus a bit. He was going to stay where he was, in the in-between place, so he could talk to me, but we decided that he would move on, since I'd be able to talk to him there as well. It was a great experience." He looked around, and smiled. "But what's even better is being back here. After all that time as a phoenix, I'm really happy to be a human again, and you guys are the reason. I missed all of you while I was gone."

The others smiled, and Molly sniffled. "Thank you, dear. We missed you, too." Hermione sent that she missed him as well, and they looked at each other in surprise.

"What?" asked Ginny.

"Our mental link is... different," said Harry.

"Less strong," agreed Hermione. "Flora told me she thought that might happen, but she wasn't sure. There was an aspect of the link that had to do with our physical bodies, even though it's basically mental in nature. Since Harry has a different body, that part has changed, kind of like the scar. We still have the link, we can still communicate anything we

want to, but I think what this means is that we won't communicate by accident anymore. No more unintentional sending." She paused, and added to Harry, "Which I can't say disappoints me, and I'm sure you feel the same way."

He nodded. "You knew I would, of course. We both always knew that it was an unavoidable consequence of the bonding that Fawkes and Flora did with us before we went into the Ring, but we both knew that it was annoying at times. I think you know that I don't take it personally that you're happy not to receive my feelings that I don't intend to send."

"Well, then there's two good things to come out of this," commented Neville. "There should be, since it was such a problem in other ways."

Arthur appeared to be debating something internally, and he spoke. "Harry, I don't know if you'll be willing to answer this or not, but this has been bothering me, and I'd really like to know, if you'll tell me. You may or may not know that I won the Choosing in very unusual circumstances; it may have been the case that someone else with your power tilted it to me. Things have been all right since Drake was caught; a majority have approved of my conduct as Minister since that happened, but I can never shake the idea that I somehow didn't deserve it, or shouldn't have had it. I think it would set my mind at ease to at least know how it happened, if you can tell me."

Harry nodded. "Just a minute." He concentrated, and as he had expected, with a little focus was able to mentally access the 'wavelength' of phoenix communications; he could communicate as if he were currently a phoenix. He sought out Luna, found her, and exchanged impressions. After a

minute, he told her he would see her soon physically, and turned his attention back to the others.

"Okay, I've been authorized to give you certain answers, and they're to go no further than this room," he began. "There are two others like me. One has lived for hundreds of years, mostly as a phoenix." He almost identified the First as Tibetan, but realized just in time that it was known that Luna had been to Tibet recently, and the connection wouldn't be difficult to make.

"The other... I'm going to refer to as 'he'; it could be male or female, but just so I don't have to keep saying 'he or she', I'm just going to say 'he' all the time, for convenience. He's British, he participated in the Choosing, but didn't realize that he would have such a strong influence. He feels badly, Arthur, that what happened made you feel like you do, which is why he's willing to let me tell you this much. More than anything else, he doesn't want to be known. I can't say I blame him. He's extremely wary of using his power, even more than I am. Needless to say, he intends never to participate in a Choosing again, if there is one. More than that, I'm not allowed to tell you, but I guess that should be enough."

"Yes, it is," said Arthur. "Thank you, Harry, and please convey my thanks to whoever this is. I do feel a bit better knowing. I just hated having this mystery hanging over me."

"Is it someone we know?" asked Ron. Hermione shot him a glare.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I can't play 'Twenty Questions' with this," said Harry. "He could have insisted that I tell Arthur privately, but he didn't. I do know that he would hope that you wouldn't even speculate on who it is. I can't even tell

Ginny, and I wouldn't even know myself if it weren't for the fact that I'm a phoenix, and so have to know."

"I assume the other one was never known, even around the time when he was born?" wondered Pansy.

"No, no one ever knew," confirmed Harry. "I mean, you all know that if it wasn't for the fact that it was how I defeated Voldemort, I probably wouldn't have made it public either. Sometimes I still regret letting it be known." He glanced at Ginny and James. "Like when it brings danger to my wife and child, and I'm not there to protect them."

Ginny squeezed him around the shoulders. "You were there as much as you could be," she assured him. "You saved James, as much as Dobby did."

"At much less of a cost," he said somberly. "That reminds me, I'm going to want to make the rounds, say hello to people. What day is it? What time?"

"December nineteenth, about a quarter after six in the evening," said Hermione. "A Thursday."

He nodded. "I can do a few tonight, and the rest tomorrow, like the Hogwarts teachers. Do you think I should teach my classes tomorrow, or wait until after vacation?" he asked Hermione.

"You should wait; Arthur and I have an idea about that. Well, it was really Archibald's idea, but we like it. You see, Arthur still hasn't appointed a twelfth governor, and he's been taking some criticism for it. What we want you to do, when you give an interview to the Prophet tomorrow, is when they ask you about going back to Hogwarts, tell them you're not sure what you're going to do. Tell them that you can't see

yourself returning to Hogwarts while these particular governors are in place—"

"That shouldn't be too hard," Harry muttered. "I couldn't believe they were going to try to put Umbridge back in there. You did a very good job fending that off, by the way."

"Thanks. Anyway, the parents will be demanding the removal of the governors the next day, and that'll give Arthur the political cover he needs to disband the governors. He can do it anyway, but it would normally be a very controversial thing to do."

"I told Archibald last month that I was going to do it," put in Arthur, "and he asked me to wait, then came up with this plan. Normally, I wouldn't want to ask for your help, but this really rings true, after the governors tried to abet a Ministry takeover of Hogwarts."

Harry nodded. "Of course, Arthur. You shouldn't hesitate to ask anything of me, it's my fault that you have this job. I'll do anything I can to help, even if it's something I wouldn't normally do."

"Well, it's not as though I go around blaming you every day for the fact that I have the job," said Arthur humorously. "But I appreciate it, and I'll keep it in mind."

"Is everything going okay at the Ministry?" asked Harry. "And how about the Muggle world?"

"At the Ministry, fine," replied Arthur. "I've settled in, and by now, I've gotten the hang of how being Minister works. I have a little more work than most Ministers, because I decided to also remain head of the Muggle Liaison office. I can't think of anyone I trust enough to do the job, since I think it's important. I asked Remus, but he wasn't willing to

sacrifice the time he works with the werewolf foundation, and I could understand that. I asked Bill, but he doesn't want to work for the Ministry—small wonder—and there would be the nepotism issue. So, I just get a briefing from Dudley or Colin every day.

"Which brings me to the Muggles... after we caught Drake, the one who did all this, we were able to get the Persian and American wizards to intervene and pull their countries back from the war. They didn't want to, because they felt that it was something that each country chose to a certain extent, but they eventually recognized that it wouldn't have happened without wizards, and it could go on to substantially influence other Muggle events if it wasn't stopped. After the American president was killed by Drake, the American wizards influenced the vice-president—the one who launched the nuclear missiles against North Korea, did you know about that?"

Harry just nodded; Luna's misery had been known throughout the phoenix world.

"They influenced him to choose a moderate, anti-war senator from his party as his vice-president, then resign. Without any help from the wizards, fortunately, the new president went about repairing America's standing with the rest of the world, negotiating a cease-fire with Iran—he and the Ayatollah both got credit, as did Barclay—and setting a timetable for getting America out of Iraq. After that, with Barclay's help, he was able to get other countries to call off their economic war against America. The International Confederation of Wizards agreed to put mild Suggestion Charms on the leaders of their countries to lean in the direction of conciliation with America, though we think some didn't really do it. International public opinion is still strongly anti-American, but aside from providing proof that

the Americans had every reason to believe nuclear weapons had been fired at South Korea—one of the North's military leaders who survived testified that the order to use nuclear weapons was given—there wasn't much we could do about that. Or, should do, some said; many felt that America had made its own bed, and didn't deserve that much help. Also, the American president pledged a large amount of money to help radiation cleanup and reconstruction in North Korea, and the American wizards will put what pressure they need to on Congress to get it to pass. After that, the American wizards say, their interfering is done. Although, I should say, the radiation damage isn't nearly as bad as was feared; I strongly suspect that this person who doesn't want to be known did something to get rid of the worst effects of it. A lot of the North Korean Dark wizards were killed in the explosions, as were about eighty thousand Muggles, and ten thousand died in the aftermath. The North Korean government collapsed, and some of the former officials of that government are negotiating a merger with the South. So that could end up well, at least. Overall, we cleaned it up as best we could, but the Muggles will have to do the rest by themselves."

Harry nodded. "I suppose it could be worse. It obviously would have been, if not for your keeping such close track of Muggle events."

"Which has been recognized by the Prophet, at least," said Arthur. "Of course, the Prophet tends to tilt towards whoever's in the Minister's office, but I was still glad to see Muggle events getting more publicity. Oh, and in view of all this, Hermione and I had another thought for the Hogwarts curriculum."

Harry looked at Hermione inquiringly. "Muggle Studies," she explained. "It would be up to you, but we thought it might

be a good idea to start it from first year, and make it mandatory."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "John would like that," he mused. "Parents might not, but I suppose they'd live with it. I'll think about it, but it sounds like a good idea."

"Maybe it could start next year," agreed Hermione. "Considering what just happened, the timing would be pretty good. One thing we know for sure after all this is that we need to pay better attention to the Muggle world."

"Are you hungry, Harry?" asked Molly. "It seems strange to think that that body has never had human food before."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know how that whole thing works, but yes, I could definitely eat."

"Good. I spent a lot of the afternoon cooking, with Ginny's help, and it's out there under a warming charm. You shouldn't eat too much, though, give your new body a chance to get used to it."

They got up and headed for the kitchen, Harry carrying James. He stopped, reached for Ginny, and kissed her. "It's good to be back," he whispered. She smiled, kissed him, and led him to the kitchen.

Three hours later, Harry knocked on the door of Snape's quarters. The door opened, and Snape stood. "Yes, I thought you might be coming by," he said, extending a hand. "Welcome back."

Smiling, Harry shook it. "Thank you, Professor."

Snape appeared slightly uneasy while trying to appear casual. "You should feel free, every now and then, to call me

Severus." Harry's eyes went wide, and Snape's expression was between a smile and a smirk. "I knew there would be some sort of reaction. You really should work more on masking your emotions."

"Then you couldn't make fun of me about it, could you?" Harry rejoined.

Snape gestured him to a chair. "As others have pointed out, there is still plenty to make fun of you about. I am hardly worried about that changing."

"So, I assume this is Ginny's influence?" Harry asked as he sat.

"Not one of your most insightful comments, but yes," replied Snape, who gave off the air of someone getting something over with. "It could hardly be anything else. Were you aware of this when you were a phoenix?"

"Basically, yes. I knew that she was concerned about you, and that she was going to try to help you. I'm glad it's been helpful."

"So far, so good," allowed Snape. "I still have not asked anyone out, which I know is what she hopes will happen, even though she has not said as much. But I have been able to be of assistance to Hugo, which is a worthwhile purpose."

"How's he doing?" asked Harry, concerned.

"He is not as fully recovered as he will be, but he has made it much of the way back," said Snape. "He can go for longer periods of time without thinking about his experience, and the conditioning is almost gone. He still suffers from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, which was inevitable, and will hopefully fade with time. He stayed at your home for

three weeks, then slowly spent more and more time in his own apartment, which now for all practical purposes is quite safe, though it was difficult for him to think of it as such."

"I could make it extremely safe," offered Harry.

Snape nodded, obviously having expected Harry's suggestion. "We knew that you would make such an offer, of course. He decided that he would not take you up on it, that he needs to live in the real world, with all its unpredictability. The thought was, naturally, extremely tempting for him. When you talk to him, I urge you not to explicitly make the offer, as it would simply task his willpower."

Harry wished Hugo would take him up on it, but he could understand the reasoning. "All right. I am going to keep an eye on him, though, without his knowledge."

"Harry," Snape said sharply. More quietly, he said, "He will be all right. He is under no threat, and very few people know what happened to him. Anyone who knows him will simply think that he came back from his world travel early. That will be good for him; what he does not need is people acting toward him with an overabundance of sympathy, however well-meaning."

Harry got Snape's message very clearly. "I'll be sure to mention that to anyone who I think might do that," he said, deadpan.

"Yes, please do," responded Snape in kind. "In any case, he is improving, and his mental health will eventually be good, if not perfect. By the way, I am curious... do you know how long he was with the phoenixes? He does not remember."

"Let me ask them..." Harry reached out to the phoenixes with his mind, and smiled. "They're amused by our preoccupation with time."

Snape briefly rolled his eyes. "It is easy for them to be amused; they do not have to keep appointments."

"They're showing me by using the arc of the sun in the sky... wow, it looks like about a half an hour."

Snape's eyebrows rose. "Quite a long time; with you, it was less than a minute. Of course, his condition was desperate."

"I'm glad they were able to help him, and that you were, as well."

Snape shrugged lightly. "The similarities between his condition and my former one made the idea obvious. By the way, there is something you should know..." Snape gave him a small grin. "I said you should work on masking your emotions, and here is a chance to do so. I am going to tell you something that will surprise you. As an exercise, I would like you to do your best not to react, to act as if you are not surprised, that you already knew what I was going to say. All right?"

Harry nodded, wondering what it was. "Okay. Go ahead."

"I am aware that Luna Lovegood has the same capabilities that you do."

Harry's eyes went wide in surprise. "Oh, good," said Snape sarcastically, clearly having expected that Harry would fail his test. "Well done. Clearly, we have a lot of work to—"

"How did you—"

"She needed my help," replied Snape, who went on to relate Luna's dilemma regarding the possible exposure of Hogwarts to the Muggle world. "I told you this," Snape went on, "so that you would know that I knew, and you could discuss matters relating to it with me if you chose. She recently suffered greatly, in the same way you did a year ago. She may wish to talk about it with you, as you are the only one who will be able to truly identify with her situation."

Harry mentally reached out to Luna, and they traded impressions. "I'll be talking to her soon," he told Snape. "She appreciated your help with that, and she said to thank you for recommending that she read Albus's book. She said it's helped a lot, especially since what happened, that you just mentioned. She says that even though Albus didn't know the kind of power she and I now have, a lot of what he says in the book is relevant to our situation. I hadn't thought of it that way, but she's certainly right."

With a short nod, Snape responded, "We all must make our own choices, as Albus always said. Free will and personal growth are very intertwined, and even more so for you and her, since your freedom of action is so much wider than that of almost all of humanity. It is ironic that it seems to be more a curse for you than a blessing."

Harry nodded. "That's for sure." There was a brief silence, then Harry spoke again. "They tell me you were publicly known as the one who captured Drake. How has that affected you, and your life?"

Snape grunted in annoyance. "Taking credit for the capture, which Hugo greatly appreciated my doing, was the one thing about this that I would truly rather have avoided. You know very well that I do not care about my public image. Arthur apologetically offered me an Order of Merlin, first

class, explaining that it would look bad politically if he did not at least offer it. I decided to accept it—"

"You *what?*" exclaimed Harry, very surprised. "You turned it down when Bright offered it to you a few years ago."

"That was because," Snape explained, "the only reason he offered it to me was that you demanded that he do so." Grinning at Harry's further unconcealed surprise, he went on, "He did not tell me this, of course. He and I did not exactly get along, as you know, so when he offered it, I suspected an ulterior motive. He denied your involvement, and while his Occlumency skills were enough to prevent my detecting his falsehood through Legilimency, I knew he was lying all the same. I was not annoyed with you; I knew that 'your heart was in the right place,' as they say. I simply did not want to accept an award that was offered to me under duress, however well-deserved I know you will say it was. Accepting it from Arthur... balanced the scales, we could say.

"In any case... with the exception of the award ceremony, I avoided appearing in public as much as possible, though at Ginny's urging I behaved tolerantly toward those who approached me to praise my actions. I naturally had to endure a fair bit of jesting in the staff room, about which I was slightly less tolerant. And I tolerated nothing from the students, whose attention I quickly redirected toward their work."

"Why are you so resistant to praise?" wondered Harry. Instantly it occurred to him that Snape might feel so conscience-stricken over his actions earlier in life that he felt he deserved no praise of any sort, regardless of what he accomplished.

Snape gave Harry a warning glance. "Ginny is attempting to work with me on that. I do not need you to do so as well."

Harry knew he shouldn't say it, but he couldn't resist. "Well, at least this'll help if you ever do decide to ask someone out —"

Snape quickly leaned forward and pointed at Harry sharply. "Don't—"

Harry quickly held up his hands in surrender. "I'll never say anything like that again, I promise," he assured Snape. Wow, he's sensitive, thought Harry.

Snape slowly relaxed, and sat back in his chair. "This is why I talk to Ginny and not you," he said disdainfully. "She knows better than to say such things. I must do this at my own pace."

"I didn't mean to criticize," said Harry, slightly defensively.

"I know. You simply need to be more selective regarding which of your thoughts you vocalize. Of course, this has always been a problem for you." A tiny smile came to Snape's face. "Perhaps you should have Ginny work on it with you."

Harry smiled. "Probably not a bad idea." Same old Snape, he thought. Different, but in many ways, the same.

Harry made the rounds of the teachers' quarters, visiting each for ten or fifteen minutes. He visited John last; John didn't live at Hogwarts, but Harry had been to his home before, and knew where it was. He knocked on the front door, John welcomed him back, and they talked for a few minutes.

"Harry," said John nervously, "there's something I'd like to talk to you about, but I'd also like Hermione and Arthur here. Can you arrange that?"

"Sure," he said, surprised. Harry communicated with Fawkes and Flora, and their puzzled companions arrived shortly.

"Thanks for coming, I know it's a bit late," said John. "There's something I've been wanting to tell someone about for a while, but I wanted to tell you three first. I want this to go no further than you three right now."

They all nodded. "What is it?" asked Arthur.

Without a word, John gestured to a small, red rubber ball on a stand in his living room. It flew into his hand. He took in the others' stunned expressions in stride. "Yes, that's kind of how I felt. And no, I've checked my genealogy, and I'm sure there are no wizards. This is from practicing the energy of love with you, Harry. This means that a Muggle—presumably, any Muggle—can become a wizard."

Harry, Hermione, and Arthur were still silent for a minute. "The repercussions of this could be... staggering," managed Arthur. "Who knows about this?"

"Only my wife—she's out, by the way—and I. I've actually been a little paranoid that in all this terror, we'd both somehow get killed, and this information would be lost. On the one hand, it's so explosive that I want as few people to know about it as possible, but on the other hand, we need to not lose information like this. I'm wondering what you all think of this."

"Where to start," said a stunned Hermione. "First of all, you were right not to tell anyone. This can't be widely known,

even in the wizarding world because it would get out to the Muggle world, through those wizarding websites."

"Which, by the way, Harry, I need to have a talk with you about," added Arthur gravely. "I'm going to ask you to do something you're not going to want to do with your power, but I've thought it over and I truly think it's necessary. Those websites have nearly gotten us exposed more than once, and limited our freedom of action."

Harry knew what Arthur was asking, and Arthur was right, he didn't want to, but he knew that he would likely end up doing what Arthur asked. "We'll talk about it," he assured Arthur.

Arthur nodded. "But yes, I agree with Hermione. If the wizarding world were ever exposed, and this information as well, it could precipitate a global war; it would be like Trent's 'beware the energy of love' thing writ large. But the possible good this could do is enormous. This should be acted on, but it has to be handled exactly right."

"Fortunately, we have a Minister who will do that," said John; Arthur smiled in embarrassment. "I've had time to think about this, of course. I think we should start gathering a group of Muggles, maybe British ones to start with, who already have an interest in spirituality. We reveal the existence of magic, put them under Forgetfulness spells, tell them my story, and imbue them with confidence—not magically—that they can do what I did. If it starts to work, we can do it more and more. But to do it quietly is going to take a long time. It could take centuries."

Hermione put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "There's one of us who could possibly be around for centuries."

"I haven't decided that yet," he said quietly.

"I know," she said, equally quietly. "This is just something to think about. Living for centuries just for the sake of it is one thing; I'm not sure I'd want it either. But doing it with a good purpose in mind... well, like I said, it's something to think about."

He found he couldn't seriously contemplate it right there and then. Maybe this is the way Snape feels about dating, thought Harry; he doesn't want to be pushed. I should understand stuff like that better. "I think your idea is a good one, John," agreed Harry. "Arthur, any ideas on how it should be done? Through the Ministry, or privately?"

Arthur thought for a few seconds. "Maybe both. Colin and Dudley could handle the logistics of it, but it wouldn't be an official Ministry project. Fortunately, people still don't pay a lot of attention to what they do. I'll talk to them about it. Don't worry, I'll impress the need for secrecy extremely strongly."

John nodded. "That's very important. I want someone, and you'd be best, Arthur, to keep track of exactly who knows this. No one should know it who doesn't need to. I'm not only concerned about Muggle reaction, but I think some wizards wouldn't be keen on it, either. You know, the type who sneer at non-pure-bloods. They like to feel special because they're wizards, and pure-blood. If they knew there was a plan to increase the number of wizards, it might make them feel less special, and they might resist."

"There are all kinds of possible ramifications," agreed Hermione. "We should all sleep on this for a few days, maybe start doing something after the new year. We should go slow with this."

"Agreed," said John. "Look how long it took for me to tell anyone except my wife. It's not every day someone discovers something that will change the course of human history."

Harry had one more person he wanted to meet before calling it a night. He mentally sought out Luna through the phoenix communication channels, and they agreed to meet at the phoenix gathering place. She stopped time for everywhere but the island they were on, walked up to him, and hugged him. "It's good to see you again," she said, squeezing him.

He patted her back. "You, too." They sat near the stream. Phoenixes perched in trees, flew around, and occasionally sang. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

She nodded, understanding his point. "It's part of our spiritual growth," she said philosophically. "And that's never fun. Ginny would know that, right now."

"I suppose she would," he agreed. "It's been pretty hard for her. But for Dobby, it would have been crushing."

She nodded somberly, then forced herself to meet his eyes. "I could have saved James," she said simply. "I didn't."

He became equally somber. "I didn't know at the time this had happened to you; you hadn't become a phoenix yet. If I had known, I would have pleaded with you to save him. But having lived with this for a while, I can understand why you didn't. I'm sure it wasn't an easy decision."

She shuddered. "You have no idea. I had just seen him earlier that day, and he's such a sweetie, you couldn't help but love him. That just made it harder. I feel like I want to spend an hour explaining myself to you, because I feel guilty."

"You shouldn't—"

"I know, but I do anyway. I'll get over it; it helps a lot that he lived. I just wanted to get that out of the way and tell you that, so I didn't have to think about it, which I've done a lot. I'm sorry I won't let you tell Ginny about me. It's partly the principle of limiting the knowledge—you, my father, Colin, and Snape are the only four that know—but I admit that I don't think I could look her in the eye, with her knowing what I didn't do and what it almost cost her. You can understand it; I'm not sure she could. You and I have both sat on a floor and cried over people we could have saved, but didn't. I think that does something to a person. The First tried to warn me."

"I don't agree with the First," said Harry. "I'd rather live among the people I love, use my power when I think I should, and accept the fact that I'll suffer sometimes for not using it. I don't want to live in isolation from humanity."

"I can understand that. But I think he'd say, come and talk to me when you've lived a few centuries. I don't think he decided to retreat right away. We don't know all of what he's been through."

"I wasn't judging him," Harry hastened to point out. "I just don't agree with him. He would have me not use my power at all, even to save people I cared about."

"If our situations had been reversed... if I was stuck as a phoenix, my baby was about to die, you'd save him." He saw the pain in her eyes.

"Yes, I would. But honestly, I understand the argument for not doing it. It's a reasonable argument, probably better spiritually. If you really understand the spiritual realm, then you don't have to feel bad for anyone who dies; they're

going home, to the place where things are easy and peaceful. And I understand that this gave Ginny a spiritual growth experience she wouldn't otherwise have had. I know all that. But I think of what Albus used to say, that for this kind of situation there's no right or wrong; we just have to make a choice. Saving someone in that situation is the choice I would make. Maybe I'm being selfish by taking away someone's opportunity for spiritual growth. But I just have to do what I can live with." With just a hint of humor, he added, "I suppose the people close to me are going to have to get their spiritual growth some other time."

"Or wait for you to be turned into a phoenix again," she agreed. "I've actually been coming around to your point of view on this, since the Korean thing. The First spoke very eloquently when I was going to save James, and very convincingly. But as time has passed, there's one thing that I keep coming back to, and I can never come up with an answer for it: how can I be who I want to be, who I see myself as, if I have to repress my urge to save people when I can? I feel like it makes me a different person, and I don't like that person. I can't be that person, at least not yet. Maybe I'll be able to, after two centuries. But it's going to happen when it happens, and I'm not going to force it. I have to be who I am right now."

"I don't think the First would begrudge you that. I just think he wanted you to see the whole picture. He's entitled to his opinion, just like we're entitled to ours." After a short pause, Harry added, "By the way, I just talked to John. He was taking an energy-of-love class, and now all of a sudden he can use magic."

She nodded, not as surprised as he had been. "I had wondered if that was possible, actually. You discovered with the energy of love that magic comes from the spiritual

realm, that the energy of love is just a shortcut to that. Wizards have a built-in connection to that, but we're the same species as Muggles are. It makes sense that even if they don't have it built-in, they can learn to access it with training and practice. A few people are born with the ability to see the spiritual realm, while most have to learn it. Magic shouldn't be that much different. What are you going to do about it?"

"Recruit some Muggles, see if we can teach them like I taught John. Hermione was saying it could take centuries, and I was wondering if you'd thought about whether you're going to live that long or not."

She shook her head. "I have no idea. You?"

"I don't like to think about it, probably because I don't like the idea of outliving everyone I'm close to."

"And, just your luck, you're close to a lot of people," she agreed. "Well, at least I would still be around, for whatever that's worth."

He reached out and took her hand. "It's worth a lot," he said, meeting her eyes.

She nodded and squeezed his hand. In that instant, she wondered—and she was somehow sure he did as well—whether after everyone close to both of them had died, they might both have Burning days and start a new life with each other as partners. They would then at least be spared having to watch their spouse die, if they wanted to live for a longer time among humans. But that could wait for the distant future, she knew, and she knew he knew. She loved Colin, and he loved Ginny. Live one life at a time, she thought.

"Thanks," she said, and let go of his hand.

"What are you going to do now, for a job?"

"It's not like I need one," she pointed out.

"That's true," he agreed. "I suppose you've discovered that you can conjure permanent things."

Her eyebrows rose. "No, I didn't know that. You've been keeping it a secret." She paused. "Very understandably."

He smiled. "I thought so. No, money's no problem. After what happened, I've decided to conjure a few hundred thousand Galleons' worth of gold and bury it under the house, for emergencies, like if I ever get stuck as a phoenix again. Not that it's likely. No, I didn't mean a job for financial reasons, but for something to do, some useful way of spending your time."

She gave him a small smile. "Did you have any ideas?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

The next day, after breakfast, Harry went to Hogwarts. He wanted to talk to the students, but reluctantly waited to do so, in deference to Arthur and Hermione's wishes regarding the governors. He would, however, talk to those he knew could keep secrets.

He walked into the Hogwarts kitchens at a little after nine a.m. Gasps went up, and house-elves came scurrying around from all parts of the large kitchen; soon, he had their undivided attention. "Hello," he said. "I'm not officially back yet, so please don't tell anyone I visited here. But I wanted to talk to you all. I wanted to tell you how proud I was of Dobby, and how much Ginny and I miss him. He was a wonderful being."

The house-elves started chattering among themselves, and one stepped forward. "Harry Potter," he said nervously, "My name is Elly. Of course, house-elves has been talking about Dobby for a long time. Headmistress Hermione Granger said almost the same thing as Harry Potter just said. Dobby was strange, but now we thinks Dobby was a great house-elf. The mark of a great house-elf is that he would give his life to protect his masters. Dobby did that."

"We weren't his masters," said Harry earnestly. "We were his employers. He didn't do it because we were his masters; he did it because he loved us, and we loved him."

"We knows that, of course," agreed Elly. "We is just used to thinking of humans as masters. But Hermione Granger showed us what happened. We saw Ginny Potter cry over Dobby, we saw Harry Potter as a phoenix cry over Dobby. That was very powerful for us. House-elves is not used to thinking differently, but we has been talking about that. Some of us sees another way, that we can be... employees," he shuddered slightly, "and still be good house-elves. Dobby showed us how." Elly seemed to gather his courage. "Elly would be honored to become Harry Potter's house-elf, and would even... accept salary and wear clothes. Many house-elves here would do the same."

Harry smiled a little, pleased both at the compliment and the idea that Dobby, if he was watching, would be very happy. "I understand, Elly, and thank you. I haven't had time to think about that, but I definitely will." He didn't want to accept such an offer on the spur of the moment, without discussing it with Ginny, but he had other concerns as well. He remembered what Winky had done in the service of her previous masters, and especially around his children, he wanted an elf who would do the right thing rather than blindly follow the will of his master/employer. He would

decide in the next few days, by taking a phoenix-look at the elves.

The next evening, Harry teleported into the living room. Ginny was on the sofa reading, and James was on the floor, playing with the puppy. Harry leaned down, patted James on the head, and sat next to Ginny.

She smiled, and kissed him. "So, how did it go?"

"A little better than dinners with Vernon and Petunia usually go," he conceded. "It was pretty unusual. I'd been there for a half hour, Dudley and I had been talking with Vernon, Petunia was in the kitchen most of the time. The doorbell rang, and Dudley got Vernon to answer it. Dudley had arranged this, but hadn't told Vernon or Petunia. It was Kenneth Barclay, the Muggle Prime Minister."

Ginny smiled. "Were they impressed?"

"That would be putting it very mildly," he assured her. "Remember five years ago, they were impressed just to see a picture of me shaking hands with him. To them, status is everything, so to have the Prime Minister in their home was pretty much the greatest honor they could possibly have. They fell all over themselves welcoming him, and complained at Dudley for not telling them, while at the same time proud of Dudley for the association. I assume you know that Dudley and Colin have been giving Barclay briefings on developments in the magical world as it affects the Muggles." Ginny nodded. "So anyway, Barclay looks at me, and I can see the worry on Vernon and Petunia's faces, like I'm the black sheep they didn't want in the house with such an esteemed guest there. But Barclay greets me in a very friendly way, a little like an old friend—politicians are pretty good at doing that—and reminds Vernon and Petunia that he

knows about magic, and he knows they know, since I grew up there, and they must be proud to have raised two such distinguished boys. I can see the realizations on Vernon and Petunia's faces; they're not thrilled to be associated with magic, but they see that Barclay doesn't hold it against them, and since he was friendly with me, they don't have to act like they're ashamed of me. Vernon was like, 'oh, yes indeed,' and I could tell they really wanted to say something like, 'Dudley's the really good one,' but they knew how it would sound, and they didn't."

She shook her head. "I still don't know why you go over there."

"Like I've said, I think it's so my head doesn't get too big. I don't know. Anyway, Barclay said I looked just the same as when he saw me five years ago; I explained the phoenix-aging thing, which he was pretty fascinated by, and asked a few questions. Vernon started asking Barclay about Dudley's job; Dudley had clearly told Barclay what he should and shouldn't say, so Barclay just said that it was high-level work, important to the international situation, and that Dudley was indispensable. It was funny to watch, Vernon and Petunia were just about to explode with pride. Barclay also happened to mention during dinner that Dudley had single-handedly stopped a terrorist attack in October, saving lives."

Ginny chuckled. "Which is true, really."

"Yes, it is. They harassed Dudley for not telling them. I got the feeling Dudley wished Barclay hadn't said that. Dudley arranged it more as a favor to his parents, like an early Christmas gift, knowing how much they'd enjoy it, but it also raised his status in their eyes to... well..."

"The kind of status you have in the wizarding world," she teased him.

"Something like that, yes," he conceded. "Barclay also asked me during dinner about my status over the past few months; he was fascinated by my telling him about the phoenix group consciousness. Vernon and Petunia were sort of interested, and they let Barclay talk about what he wanted, but it was easy to see they kept wanting the subject to go back to Dudley. It wasn't out of rudeness to me, but just that they knew that he was probably only coming once, and this was their only chance to talk to him about Dudley. Another interesting thing happened: shortly after Barclay came by, I offered to leave, saying I hadn't planned to stay for dinner anyway, but Dudley just wanted me to be able to meet the Prime Minister again. I was offering mainly because I wanted them to be able to focus on Dudley with Barclay there, which I knew they'd want to do. But Vernon said I should stay, and I could tell that it wasn't just something he was saying to look better in front of Barclay, but that he really meant it. So it seems that while in their eyes at that time I wasn't at the same lofty height as Dudley, they regard me enough to have me around in that kind of situation, which is saying a lot, for them. It may not seem like much, but it would have never happened five years ago."

She patted him on the knee. "You know I always think you're too tolerant of them, considering how they used to treat you, and how hesitant they are even now to treat you the way you should be treated. But I'm glad it worked out all right. By the way, before I forget, Madeline Bright called in the fireplace an hour ago. I told her I'd tell you when you got back."

He nodded somberly. "I was going to visit her sometime soon, tell her how sorry I am about what happened to

Rudolphus. I should probably go do that now, I'll be back soon."

He stood and teleported to the Brights' front door, and rang the bell. Madeline greeted him warmly, brought him inside, and they sat. She thanked him for coming; he said he'd intended to anyway. "You know what a good man, and good Minister, I've always thought your husband is," he said sincerely.

She gave him a sad smile. "Thank you for that, and especially, thank you for not speaking of him in the past tense. Many well-meaning people do, but the fact is, he's still alive." She paused. "Harry, I have a request to make of you, one which I pray you'll agree to. I know this has never been done before, but if anyone can do it, you can. I want you to try to bring him back."

Startled, he was silent for a minute. He was reluctant, but he saw the conviction and desperation in her eyes, and felt he should debate it internally rather than with her.

He sat back in his chair, remembering his exact position, and stopped time. He wanted to be able to think without subjecting her to the waiting.

He didn't even know for sure that he could do it, but he had to admit that he didn't know that he couldn't, either. The question was, should he? This got right to the same questions that the First had asked Luna to consider when she'd decided to save James from Lucius Malfoy. Was a greater spiritual agenda being served by Rudolphus Bright's madness? Was this something Madeline just had to go through, to learn lessons she couldn't otherwise learn? If Harry restored Rudolphus, would something similar just happen in another life, causing them to go through the

torment all over again? Harry had been chagrined to discover, as a phoenix, that a substantial number of those he had saved on nine-eleven had died in the sarin gas attack, in an apparent effort to fulfill a destiny necessary for their spiritual growth. He took the question seriously. Would I try to undo this if it happened to Ginny? Of course. How about Dudley? Probably. Is it just a matter of how close I am to the person? Is that fair? I like Rudolphus, I think he's a good Minister, though he sometimes pays too much attention to the politics of something even when it's not really necessary, it's just his instinct. But he's a good man. Should that be my yardstick? I shouldn't do it if the person is a scoundrel?

Harry debated for another few minutes, then suddenly realized that he was just trying to talk himself into a decision he'd already made. He started time. "Okay. I'll try."

Harry and Madeline sat on either side of Rudolphus's bed at St. Mungo's; he had decided not to tell the St. Mungo's staff what he would try to do, since they would want to be the ones to make the decision, increasing Madeline's stress to no good purpose. He cast a spell on the room to make sure they weren't disturbed.

Madeline glanced at Frank and Alice Longbottom, a few beds away. "When I was thinking about asking you this, I wondered why you haven't tried this on them."

"I thought about it, soon after I got this power, but they told me it wouldn't be possible because there had been years of atrophy in the brain. Even if I could have brought them back, there would have been any of a number of problems, such as possibly severe retardation, emotional difficulties, and so forth. I told Neville I was willing to try anyway; he asked me to talk to his parents the next time I talked to

Albus. I did, and they said that I shouldn't try. But for Rudolphus, I have a feeling he would want me to try."

"I'm certain of that," she agreed. "Are you going to do the same thing you did with Snape?"

"Kind of, but I can do it much more precisely now. I can undo the physical damage, and at least some of the mental damage. The big question is whether he will come back or not. And even if he does, there are still a lot of unknowns in this," he warned her. "There will almost certainly be emotional problems. It may take years for him to be the person he was; he may never be exactly that."

She nodded. "I understand that, Harry. I just want my husband back, in whatever way I can have him. I know the risks."

"Okay," he agreed. He scanned Bright's mind, and began applying love to only those areas damaged by the Cruciatus Curse.

It was two hours later, one and a half hours since he had finished doing what he could do. Soon after that, he had become a phoenix, using the connection to the spiritual realm to see if he could contact Rudolphus. He had called Ginny on his hand to tell her what was happening, and now, they were waiting.

Harry had talked with her a little, bringing up different subjects to pass the time. He asked her, "Madeline, do you know Anne Trent?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"I heard about what happened, with their son, at the end of the Choosing. I was wondering how she was doing."

Madeline shook her head sadly. "She's staying with relatives; I talked to her a few weeks ago. She actually said she envied me, and I could tell she meant it. She said that at least I had a husband who would never do what hers had done. She's a good person. She did have a... moral failing; I suppose most of us do. Hers was that she overlooked what her husband did, most of the time. Finally she did look, and this was what happened. What Trent did surprised me a little, just because of how shocking it was, but not that much. Rudolphus had told me stories for years about the way Trent behaved at the Ministry, petty little things that really told the story about the kind of person he was. Rudolphus even said once, if anything ever happens to me, we're in trouble, because Trent taking over would be very bad. He apparently treated low-level employees rather badly, like they were nothing."

"My godfather, Sirius Black, once said that the true measure of a man is how he treats those beneath him, those who don't have the power to fight back."

"Your godfather knew what he was talking about," she agreed. "A couple of times—I probably shouldn't have done this—I asked a Prophet reporter to interview a few low-level people who had contact with my husband. They were guaranteed anonymity, he asked them for any 'dirt' on Rudolphus. They just said that he treated them fairly and well. I could have guessed it, but it's somehow better to know it for sure. This isn't to say I blame Anne Trent; like I said, we all have our weaknesses. But what he did was probably more of a surprise to her than it was to many in the political world."

Harry had discovered that Trent had, a few weeks before, reached an agreement with the Ministry in which he would be released from prison and leave the country, the charges suspended on the condition that he never returned to

Britain. Some of the red substance used to identify Voldemort had been absorbed into his skin, so the Ministry could know immediately if he ever returned. "I wish there was something I could do for her, but I don't think there is," said Harry. "Do you know the situation with their son?"

"His wife is divorcing him," said Madeline. "He's not going to have much of a life from this point on; you know how homosexuals are considered."

"I know. I thought I would talk to him, suggest that he get out of England, maybe move to someplace like San Francisco, where that kind of thing is more acceptable. He might get public support in a place like that."

"I don't think he has the means to move, to get a place," said Madeline. "His wife is probably going to get most of their money, because the divorce will be considered to be his fault."

Harry nodded, and said nothing more about it. He decided that he would help Paul, conjure him some money if it seemed necessary. He had done nothing wrong. Well, he had married someone under false pretenses, but he had been doing what society expected, in fact, demanded of him. That might be a moral weakness, Harry thought, but as moral weaknesses went, there were much bigger ones.

Rudolphus's eyes blinked, then opened slightly. Madeline's eyes went wide; she grabbed his hand. "Darling!" she exclaimed, touching his face. "Are you there?"

"Mad..." He tried to speak, but trailed off. Delighted and concerned at the same time, she looked at Harry. He did Legilimens, getting Bright's most recent memories.

Harry smiled. "He's there. He's very disoriented right now, which isn't surprising. I'm going to put him under the Imperius Charm, to encourage him to get better using what resources he has himself."

Bright's eyes opened wide, and Harry could tell his mind was much clearer. "Welcome back, Rudolphus."

"Harry? Madeline?" He looked around the room. "What happened?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" asked Harry.

"I went to bed, and now, I'm here. What's going on?"

"I covered it up with a Memory Charm," Harry explained to Madeline. "The memory is pretty traumatic, and I didn't want him to have to deal with it as soon as he came back. Now that he's under the Imperius Charm, it's safe, I can let him remember."

Harry lifted the Memory Charm, and saw the realization come to Bright's face. "That bastard," said Bright. "Was he caught?"

Harry nodded. "Snape caught him."

"I'm going to give Snape a big, wet kiss on the lips."

"I'll be sure to tell him," laughed Harry.

"Brantell... is he okay?"

"He's... getting better." Harry reminded himself to tell Madeline later about the secrecy of that information.

Bright looked at his wife. "Madeline. How long has it been?"

She beamed. "Two months."

"Two months?" He turned to Harry. "Who's Minister?"

"Arthur Weasley."

Bright paused, trying to process what Harry had said. He turned to his wife and said, "It sounded like he just said Arthur Weasley was Minister."

She laughed. "He is."

"I see." He paused, staring at Harry for several seconds. "So I guess you've given up the pretense of not using your powers, and are just completely controlling society now." Harry smiled; Bright continued, "Because that's the only way Arthur Weasley becomes Minister."

He doesn't know how close he is to being right, thought Harry. "It's a long story," he said. "I wasn't here for most of it, but Madeline will tell you all about it."

She nodded, then asked Harry, "Are you keeping that spell on him? What's the plan?"

"Using his brain like he is right now is good for him, it'll help his recovery, along with the instructions I'm giving him with the Imperius Charm. I can't keep doing it indefinitely, obviously. After we're done, he'll go to sleep, then when he wakes up, we'll see how he's doing. Like I said, this may take a while."

"I'm just so thrilled to have him back. Thank you so much."

"You know, I'm not used to being talked about as though I weren't in the room."

"You should be used to it from me," she pointed out.

"Okay, that's true," he admitted. Turning to Harry, he added, "Seriously, I'd also like to thank you. You gave me my life back." Harry started to speak, but Bright cut him off. "I know, I could have problems when I'm not under this spell. I'll remember that. I know it won't be easy. But you've already done a lot." He reached for Harry's hand; Harry squeezed it, and let it go. As Madeline started telling her husband the story of the Choosing, Harry reflected that it would be difficult to say that he hadn't done the right thing.

Harry teleported into the bedroom at one a.m.; Ginny was lying in bed, still awake. "How did it go?"

"It looks like he's going to be all right, but it's too early to say for sure." He took off his robe, and lay under the covers next to her.

"My amazing man," she smiled, "bringing someone back from insanity. It's all in a day's work for Harry Potter."

"You just wait," he half-joked, "the Prophet will interpret this as a lack of confidence on my part in Arthur's leadership."

She laughed. "If Bright's ready in five years, I'm sure Dad would be happy to hand it over. He's still got one undersecretary position open; he could appoint Bright, even if he's not recovered, so that when the time comes he'd be eligible. Of course, Dad doing such a thing would be interpreted as a strong indication that he didn't intend to serve more than five years, and Archibald was always telling Dad he shouldn't say that, even though it was true. Archibald said that if you limit how long you might serve, you limit your own power unnecessarily."

Harry was amused to hear Ginny talking in a way she never would have three months ago. "I guess your whole family got a crash course in politics."

She rolled her eyes. "I guess it shows. As soon as Dad's not Minister any more, I'll start trying to forget it all." She snuggled closer to him. "Of course, now I have something else to focus on."

"I'm glad," he said, and kissed her. They kissed for a minute, then he lay back, Ginny snuggled into his shoulder, occasionally reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

"It's strange... I feel like I'm trying to catch up with everything that happened," he mused. "Hermione had her name dragged through the mud, what happened to Hugo, Snape... I even got a phoenix-feeling that something happened with Ron and Pansy, but I don't know what."

"They're fine," Ginny assured him. "I've talked to them both separately recently, and they're happy and going ahead with the wedding. It'll be the second Sunday of April, I forget what day that is."

"I'm really glad," he said. He got the feeling that there was something she wasn't telling him, but he supposed that not everything was his business. "And you, of course. You had a pretty rough time for a while there."

She reached her arm around his chest. "I did, but it all came out all right in the end. You were right, in that dream. It had to happen, so I could learn."

"What dream?"

She was surprised he didn't remember. "The dream you arranged, with Albus, for me the night after the attempt on

James. You met me, in human form, in my dream."

Harry suddenly remembered, as a phoenix, Snape asking him if he had been connected to a dream she'd had. "I know this is going to seem strange, but I didn't arrange that dream. I had nothing to do with it."

"Of course you did," she insisted. "You just don't remember it."

"Believe me, I would remember. Can you tell me about it?"

She propped herself up in bed on her elbow, and started to tell him. She remembered it well after Snape had helped her. He listened with interest, and when she finished, he shook his head. "That was you, Ginny. Only you."

"How could I have a dream like that, with such specific information? You know how most dreams are, bizarre things are always happening. This wasn't like that."

"I don't mean I think it was a usual dream, just that I wasn't involved. I think that this was a very unusual dream, and the information was given by your... higher self, we could say. This was your way of telling yourself information you needed to know."

She paused, thinking. "Wow. It's hard to believe; I was sure all this time it was you. So that means it wasn't really Malfoy in the dream?"

He considered it. "Probably not, but I suppose it wouldn't be impossible; that kind of visitation does apparently happen sometimes. I'd say the important thing isn't whether it was really him or not, but just that having that encounter helped you get past what was bothering you."

She nodded. "I see what you mean. If it wasn't him, then it seems very much like what he might say, with the awareness of the spiritual realm. I suppose that in the long run it doesn't really matter. But why was the dream so specific about being arranged by you? Why pretend to be something other than a regular dream?"

"So you would take it seriously, and not just dismiss it as a regular dream."

She raised her eyebrows. "Well, in that case, my higher self is clever, because it worked."

He rolled onto his side and put an arm around her. "All of you is clever."

"I must be, since I ended up with you." They kissed, and spent the next minute lost in each other's eyes, and love. The love I feel from the spiritual realm when I'm a phoenix is really good, he thought... but the love in her eyes is even better.

He was sure it always would be.

Epilogue

January 5, 2003

5:59 p.m. GMT

Owls had been sent to the students days before, informing them that there would be a 'Welcome Back' feast to begin the second term, after winter holiday. Judging from a glance at the Great Hall, the owls had been heeded; it appeared to Hermione's eyes that there were no empty seats. Students were talking, but not at the loud volume she might have expected. No food was on the tables; all of the teachers were

sitting at the teachers' table. Almost all, she corrected herself.

At six o'clock, she stood. "Welcome back to Hogwarts," she said loudly into the magical microphone. "I hope you all had excellent holidays; I certainly did. The first order of business is to introduce to you the headmaster—" Excited applause started on that word; she knew she had to finish quickly or be drowned out. "—Professor Harry Potter!"

Having earlier decided 'what the hell,' Harry made a splashier entrance than he usually would; he teleported to the podium, right behind Hermione. She turned and hugged him; they continued the hug for a few seconds before she let go of him and took her seat. He looked out into the crowd, which was still applauding and cheering heartily. He wondered if this would have been the reaction to his return in any case, or whether the applause was also motivated by students' worry after their parents read in the Prophet that he might not return if something wasn't done about the governors. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, the governors all submitted their resignations before Arthur had a chance to dismiss them. Arthur was now at work devising a new system for supervision of Hogwarts; he had assured Harry that it would be composed of parents only, and its power would be much less than the governors had. A Ministry takeover of Hogwarts would no longer be conceivable.

"Thank you," Harry shouted, but it still wasn't loud enough; he employed the 'please sit down' gesture he'd seen Albus use on similar occasions. Finally, the students became quieter, and he was able to speak.

"Thank you very much," he said, heartened by the support. "I'm sorry I haven't been around for a while, but I've been

indisposed." The comment got a laugh, as Harry had hoped it would. I'll never be a standup comedian, he thought, but I should be able to get away with one joke.

"It's been a very busy time, and I want to comment on a few things that happened while I wasn't around. As you know, in October, some people at the Ministry of Magic tried to take over Hogwarts, to put it under Ministry control. That effort was defeated, and I want to thank the temporary headmistress, Hermione Granger, and the temporary deputy headmaster, Severus Snape, for their roles in accomplishing that." Prompted by Harry, the students applauded again. Hermione smiled and waved; Snape gave Harry a look whose meaning Harry easily interpreted as 'I'll get you back for this.' Harry smiled. I'm sure you will, he thought.

"I also want to thank you and your parents, whose pressure recently brought about the end of the Hogwarts governors, the group the Ministry used to try to take over. Hogwarts is now safe, and we have a Minister of Magic whose focus is not trying to take over things, but to take care of things. And I would say that even if he weren't my father-in-law." This got a moderate laugh. I shouldn't push my luck, he thought.

"I suppose all of you know that the wizard who caused most of the difficulty in the wizarding world, including getting me stuck as a phoenix for a while, also caused a lot of problems in the Muggle world. It's getting harder and harder to hide the wizarding world from Muggles, and I'm sure those of you who take Muggle Studies already know why. Partly because of what happened, Muggle Studies is going to become a more important class in the future." He would leave it vague for the time being, to put the idea into their heads. He didn't want to announce the change in status for Muggle Studies until May or June.

"I also want to recognize the loss of Derek Wilson, back in October, though I know there have already been services for him. I was very fond of Derek, and very sad about what happened. But one of the good things about being a phoenix, which I was at that time, is that you have a kind of connection to what I call the spiritual realm, the place where we all come from, and where we go when we die. I was able to sense his presence there, and to know that he was happy and at peace. His friends were able to know that too, which made them happy. We still miss him, of course.

"I was a phoenix for over two months, and I learned a lot in that time. I spent a lot of time connected to the spiritual realm, and I realized that it's a very important place, but we don't know very much about it. I've talked about it in classes sometimes, but it's so important that it deserves a class of its own. The subject of the study of the spiritual realm, and other matters of life, death, and the soul, is called Mysticism. I've wanted to have a class on Mysticism at Hogwarts for five years now, but I hadn't been able to find the right teacher. I'm pleased to tell you that I finally did. Please give a warm welcome to the newest member of the Hogwarts faculty, Professor Luna Lovegood!"

Luna walked to the podium as he spoke; he gave her a hug, and sat at the table next to her. She waited for the applause to die down. She's never spoken to so many people, thought Harry, but she doesn't seem nervous at all.

"Thank you," she said. "And thank you, Harry, for that nice introduction. I never expected to become a professor, but if we know something, we should teach it. And this subject, at least, is something I know.

"This class will start from tomorrow; you can choose to take it or not. Your prefects will post the times for each House and

year in your common rooms; a time was found for each group when no one has any other lessons. The location will be the classroom at the top of the North Tower, which was last used by Professor Trelawney five years ago. Harry has used his unusual powers to give the classroom some... interesting visual effects, to illustrate some ideas and give the room the right atmosphere." Luna herself would do those things, of course, but she had to pretend that Harry had made it possible.

"There won't be an O.W.L. or a N.E.W.T. for the class this year, but there will be next year, because there has to be an O.W.L. and a N.E.W.T. for every class at Hogwarts. But the truth is that this class won't be about facts. Memorizing things won't do you any good. Now, how can you learn if there aren't any facts? The same way I did: by being open to ideas, even if they seem strange. If you don't come to this class with an open mind, you won't learn anything. You have to decide for yourself whether it makes sense or not. Nothing about this can be scientifically verified, or proved.

"Now, those of you who are fifth, sixth, or seventh years were here when I was a student. I was known for being strange, and wearing funny hats." A light chuckle went through the Hall. "But I was strange partly because I was open to things that couldn't be proved, and I didn't worry about what other people thought." She reached down under the podium, picked up her hat with large mouse ears, and put it on; almost all the students laughed. She smiled, and continued, "If you don't think you can learn anything from a teacher who wears a funny hat, then you shouldn't take this class. But if you do, you could learn a lot, and it could be very important. I'll see you around the school." She waved, and sat down to strong applause; Harry could see the Slytherin seventh years already starting to spread the word

about their experience with Luna's abilities. He had a feeling her class would be well-attended.

He stood again. "Thank you. And now, it's time to eat." Food appeared on all of the plates, and students across all tables started eating and talking.

Luna was sitting between Harry and Hermione. "Nice speech," he said.

"Thanks," she replied. "It wouldn't have been me if I hadn't worked the funny hats into it somehow."

He laughed, and started on his food. He glanced over to see Luna talking to Hermione, and something about it felt right. He wasn't sure whether it was phoenix intuition, but he felt good about the future. As he took his second bite of food, his mind lingered on the word 'future', and he daydreamed for a minute about the distant future. An idea came to him, and his eyebrows rose involuntarily as he immediately realized that this idea would change his future significantly, for the better. He started to analyze it, to make sure it was feasible, but his intuition told him that there would be no problems, that it would work.

They're probably just starting the feast, thought Ginny. She was alone in her living room, just having finished a series of Occlumency exercises; James and Elly were at the Burrow, where her dinner would start in a half hour. It seemed strange not to have dinner with Harry and the other four on a Sunday, but since Harry and Hermione had to be at Hogwarts, they had their group dinner the day before.

Ginny had felt particularly good all day, though she hadn't thought about it consciously until doing the Occlumency exercises. Relaxing and clearing her mind had come more easily to her than ever before. She was thinking about

Apparating to the Burrow when, to her great surprise, a very familiar phoenix burst into view and fluttered down next to her, perching on the arm of the sofa. In his beak was an envelope.

"Harry? What are you doing? You're supposed to be at the feast..." She trailed off as she noticed the envelope; he leaned his head forward as if to offer it, and she took it. Her name was written on the outside, in Harry's handwriting. She glanced at him in puzzlement; he gestured to the letter with his head, urging her to open it. She did, and started reading.

To my beloved Ginny,

We've known for some time that I have the ability to duplicate the effect of magical artifacts, such as the one that stops time. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me to do that with the Time-Turner. Perhaps I'd never had a good enough reason, but now, I do. So, though the year is 2003 as you read this, as I write it, it's 2095. Very soon after I finish writing this, I'll travel back to the day you'll read this, take phoenix form, and appear to you as I've just done.

Of course I shouldn't tell you much about the future, but since it's 114 years since you were born, it shouldn't be a great shock to hear that you passed away some time ago. James did as well, more recently. I tell you this because you need to know it before I explain why I'm here. Of course, I remained bonded to James for all of his life; with his passing, I'm currently not bonded to anyone while I'm in phoenix form. So, I came back here, but I won't be returning to 2095 by magic; it'll be with the natural passage of time.

I've done this so that as a phoenix, I can bond with you, as I've wanted to since I first became a phoenix. But this way is

better than if I had been able to do it then. You see, I won't be taking my human form again for decades, so I'll be able to companion you as a phoenix full-time, instead of occasionally, as it would have been the other way. I plan to come back a day early and start the bonding process, hidden from your view, so by the time you read this, it'll be at least partly established.

I grieved for you greatly when you died, even though you were happy and had no regrets, and I've missed you greatly since then. I know that as you read this, the phoenix that is with you will want to take human form, so that I can touch you, hold you one more time. I love you so much, you might be able to imagine what a temptation it will be. But I won't, because I know I shouldn't. Doing it once would tempt me to do it again, then once more, and there can't be two human Harrys in your life. Though you have joked that you wouldn't mind, we both know it wouldn't be fair to my younger self or healthy for our relationship. So, I'll be staying a phoenix.

That notwithstanding, I'm thrilled that my powers allow me to do this, and I'm looking forward to it more than I can say. I'll be with you again, and in a way, even closer to you than I was before. I'll know your feelings, and be able to help you and comfort you in a way I couldn't as a human, despite my best intentions. You'll know my love for you, and I'll know yours for me, in a way more powerful than words. I'll be yours, and only yours. As it should be.

I'll say it one last time with words, before I say it with feelings: I love you, Ginny. I was so very happy and lucky to be your life partner; you're all that a man could want and hope for. I've been blessed in many ways in my life, and you are by far the greatest one of all. With great anticipation, I look forward to what no man has ever before had: a second time around with the woman he loves.

Yours always,

Harry

Tears had started falling from Ginny's eyes halfway through the letter. As she finished reading, she noticed that they were falling onto the letter, but were vanishing instead of smearing the ink; through her tears, she smiled as she realized that he'd anticipated it and charmed the paper to absorb tears. She took a deep breath, and mentally asked Harry to hop onto her lap, which he did. She put her arms around him, holding him gently. She made no effort to stop crying, as her tears were tears of joy.

She got an impression from him, suggesting that she clear her mind. She took another deep breath, and focused on doing so. When she had, she got another impression: he was sending her his feelings.

It was even better than she had imagined it would be.

The End

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Author's note: This has been the fifth and last of the stories I've posted to this site, so no others will appear for the time being. I don't rule out writing another Harry Potter story, but have no immediate plans to do so; I plan for my next project to be an original fiction story, which I hope to start writing in the not-too-distant future. I plan to post that story for free on the web under the name semprini.

As I mentioned previously, I write a blog that I update once a week or so; any news about that story would be mentioned there. The blog is called Taking a Moment to Think, and is at the address sempriniblog (at) blogspot (dot) com. That blog

also contains a link to a page containing PDF files of all five of my Harry Potter stories.

Thanks to everyone who commented on any of the stories, and I'm glad that so many people enjoyed them. I can be e-mailed through this site, and at kdx126 (at) gmail (dot) com.